

THE TOP 100 ISSUE: 27 PAGES OF THE BEST PC GAMES

NORTH  
AMERICAN  
EDITION

# PC GAMER

The  
**100**  
T O P  
PC GAMES  
★ 2017 ★

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Issue 296  
October 2017

Future





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## Where's Dragon Age 2?

It's the PC Gamer Top 100! Again! This is my favorite issue of the year, and not just because everyone else has to do the hard work. This year's list is terrific—a fine mix of PC games old and new.

This is also my last issue as editor, sadly. Phil Savage takes over next month, and I'm sure he'll do a great job. I hope you've enjoyed my era of PC Gamer. Your loyalty means a lot. Thanks for reading.

**SAMUEL ROBERTS**  
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**This month**  
Played *Star Citizen* for  
our feature on p36. It  
sounds like Firefly.



**ANDY KELLY**

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Aliens, stock photos

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**This month**  
Andy revisited one of the  
original Star Wars  
classics in Dark Forces—  
see p95.



**PHIL SAVAGE**

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Numbered lists,  
swearing at them

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**This month**  
Almost died compiling the  
Top 100. His reward: being  
PC Gamer's new editor.

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## 44 THE TOP 100

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## 84 FFXIV: STORMBLOOD

Steven Messner rates the MMO's latest expansion, which adds new classes and tons more.

## 110 KEYBOARDS TESTED

Ed Chester reviews keyboards, then our photographer tilts them oddly for a photoshoot.





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## SEND

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## YOUR REVIEWS

■ **FFXIV.** I've not been into MMOs for a while, but XIV has changed it all for me. Best MMO I've played by far. Can't wait to get *Stormblood*!  
**Josh Monaghan**  
Good luck, Josh. If we don't hear from you in the next year, we'll send a search party.

■ **Dead Cells.** Excellent Early Access 'Roguevania' with a lovely aesthetic. In the same neck of the woods as *Spelunky* and *Rogue Legacy*!  
**Andrew Adam**  
'Roguevania'? Do you ever get the feeling that genre naming is a big mess?

■ I bought *Abzû* on a whim in the Steam Summer Sale. Wonderful storytelling, strong exploration, and stunning visuals. Not your usual adventure!  
**Nikki**  
We didn't know it was possible to make a good water level, let alone a good water game.

■ Although I have played the start a bunch of times, I think this *Borderlands 2* playthrough will stick.  
**Nando**  
You can try muting the volume whenever Claptrap appears. It makes the game a lot more bearable.

## Time honored

As I glance through your last few issues, I could argue PC gaming is dying. Many have said this before, and yet the PC has thrived. However, less than 10% of games you recently reviewed appear to be worth buying. The majority of scores are 85 or less. Your reviews are pretty much on target, and unless you rate a game at 85 or above, it won't see my hard drive. If this is the trend, PC gaming might just die in the near future.

There have been many PC games that stood the test of time. So instead of making lacklustre new games, how about remaking beloved older games to play on modern hardware. Games such as *Wing Commander*, *Command & Conquer* series, and *Jedi Knight*. I realize there are legal issues, but I hope that a publisher would rather allocate funds for a reboot of a classic than for the games I see in your reviews. ■

**Joe Shebell**



## Repeatedly slammed

I read with incredulity your comment in Discuss that it's sad that *Mass Effect* had been put on hold, because a number of your coworkers slammed *Andromeda* in print and on your website. Particularly annoying was the article on the site titled '17 tiny things that drive us crazy about *Mass Effect: Andromeda*'. If members of your team don't like a game, fine. But don't bemoan the scarcity of

singleplayer games after your team just trashed a good example of one. ■  
**Daniel Hils**

Thanks for the feedback, Daniel. You're correct that some of our team didn't enjoy *Andromeda*. And maybe the balance of that coverage did skew a bit negative—we'll look at that going forward. But it's worth noting that we're not a hive mind—our reviewer, Chris Thursten, gave *Andromeda* a great score of 80.

We're always up for more *Command & Conquer*, but nonetheless disagree with your premise. In fact, so many games were getting scores in the 80s over the last few years that we had to tweak our score brackets. Consider giving some high 70s a shot. You'll find some really good games there.

## Thank you

As someone who has been playing PC games since before there were PC's. I have three comments. First, thanks for bringing back Send. Which reminds me: Thanks for your coverage of mods and indie games. Second, thanks for increasing the presence and prominence of women writers in your pages. Third, how about including a glossary of the abbreviations sprinkled throughout an issue? Sure, most readers are going to know what a FPS is, but how many are old enough to know what FMV means without looking it up? ■  
**David Weinberger**

It's a good idea, David, but unfortunately a dedicated glossary page would take space away from something else in the magazine. Instead, we should be explaining the lesser known acronyms in the article itself—this is something we'll endeavor to do in the future.

## The Send page

Come on you wankers, keep the Send page! The reader reviews and letter of the month are great features. The responses from the editor are always fun too. ■

**Dan Greenfield**

Dan wasn't the only one to email about Send. In fact, many of the emails we got these past couple of months were about this page, and now Send's in danger of only ever featuring letters about why we should keep Send. So please, if you've got a comment or query (that's not about Send), get in touch at [pcgamer@futurenet.com](mailto:pcgamer@futurenet.com).

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Windows



# MONITOR

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Released in '97, *Tibia* is one of the oldest MMOs.



THE TOP STORY

## MMO MYSTERY SOLVED

What lies beyond Tibia's legendary level 999 gate?

**T**he truth behind one of the oldest mysteries in gaming has been solved—and it's a massive disappointment. Around 15,000 people gathered on Twitch to watch as *Tibia* player Dev Onica opened the Banuta Gate of Expertise, which has been taunting players for 12 years. To pass through it you need to be level 999, which only one other player has achieved, and the mystery of what lies behind it has been a subject of much speculation.

*Tibia*'s other level 999 player, Kharsek, refused to tell the community what lay beyond the gate. 5,000 people watched on Twitch as he reached the legendary level, only to realize that he had no intention of showing them what was behind the door. He went through it later on his own, without anyone watching, and hasn't spoken a word about it since.

But Dev Onica was more forthcoming, albeit while bombarding viewers with advertisements to try and make some money. He stepped through the gate and appeared on Schrödinger's Island, a small tropical island with a few palm trees and vendors. And that was it.

Dev Onica received a virtual trophy and a congratulatory message from the developers for accessing the gate, but for the people watching the stream there wasn't much of a reward at all. "I'm not even surprised," one player said on Reddit. "Cipsoft couldn't spend more than ten

minutes designing something for an extremely important moment."

But until recently, the gate led nowhere, because Cipsoft didn't think anyone would reach level 999. The mystery, as they often do, took on a life of its own, and became much bigger than they anticipated.

### DEAD END

Many are convinced the island is a cover for a deeper secret, but that could be wishful thinking. Some in the community think Dev Onica is being deliberately unhelpful and is making no attempt to solve the mystery, which has made people even more jaded.

Another player, Lyh, is set to reach level 999 next year, and is promising to set the record straight on the gate. But the stories of these things are almost always more interesting than the solutions. Perhaps the press surrounding this will inspire the developer to expand on the reward. ■

*Andy Kelly*

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THE ISLAND IS A  
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# ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

The behemoth took a year off, but has it returned a changed series?

**I** sometimes wonder if I expect too much from *Assassin's Creed*. For me, from its hold-down-a-single-button platforming, to combat that requires little more than a press of a counterattack button, to open world maps littered with empty activities, I struggle to see the positive influence it's had on big games. It's a series that awkwardly plays itself. But even I have exceptions. *Black Flag's* intricate and skill-based sea battles seemed to have the opposite design philosophy behind it, and I think that's why people liked it. I think the rest of the game should be that interactive, including the platforming and melee combat. Why isn't it?

Jean Guesdon was the creative director of *Black Flag*, and is now helming *Origins*, which has been in development for three-and-a-half years. While not a reinvention of *Assassin's Creed*, it's learned lessons from a few of the grievances I listed above. *Origins* has a revamped combat system, narrative quests instead of an overstuffed minimap, and a gigantic landscape to explore. It's as close to a reinvention as *Assassin's Creed* has got since it began ten years ago, yet my first impression is that it still feels a bit too similar. Platforming controls the same, and my first quest—retrieving something from a ship that a man is falsely accused of stealing—wouldn't be out of place in any of the previous *Assassin's Creed* entries. Then again, a game of this scale is difficult to show off properly in a 25-minute demo with a single mission.

I ask Guesdon about the significance of *Assassin's Creed* taking a year off for the first time in eight years, and what coming back now means for Ubisoft. "When we started the game three-and-a-half years ago, we wanted it to be global, to be full, so this is why we aim for a fully seamless entire country now. We touched

a bit on that with *Black Flag*, this sense of massive scale and total freedom, and we wanted to bring that on land, for the very first time, with an entire country. This extra year really allowed us to take the time to deliver on that high quality."

I'm encouraged to check out the map during my hands-on of *Origins*, and this is a gigantic-looking version of Ancient Egypt. I don't get much of a sense of scale while I play—this demo is set in one riverside area of the game—but size isn't the only thing *Origins* has in its favor. Reactive AI systems have been woven into *Assassin's Creed* this time. I see a crocodile randomly harass some civilians, for example, and Guesdon explains that you should be able to see this sort of interaction all over the world.

"For us, it's something that we really want to push," he elaborates. "We want players to have their own personal experience, which means less scripting and less handholding. We create a world, we place some content in it—we have dozens of quests, and people that you will meet who will tell you stories. But in between, when you're in the world, a lot of things can happen. And no two people will have the same experience—it's just not possible."

## HIPPOS VS CROCS

*Assassin's Creed IV's* sense of exploration inspired the world design. "We learned a lot about that on *Black Flag*, and so the way we built the world, we really expanded this archipelago structure, where we have locations that are handcrafted by our very talented artists. You see the results: We have secrets, mysteries, treasure, and so on. But at the same time, in between, we are filling the world with some new tech. First to create the terrain, second to populate the world. We've reworked the AI so that all living beings in the world are real AI. The lions are hunting antelopes, the crocs are attacking hippos if there are any around, and the world is much more living than before."

PLAYED  
IT

**A GAME OF THIS SCALE IS  
DIFFICULT TO SHOW OFF IN  
A 25-MINUTE DEMO**

## Assassin's Creed Origins

▶ Your protagonist, Bayek (how do people pronounce that in Yorkshire?), has an eagle called Senu that he can utilize to scout out the area and tag enemies, as well as loot. "You have this new vantage point with Senu—you can look at the world from above and witness all of this. This was important for us," Guesdon says. "It's not just a gimmick—it's because we revamped the AI to a much bigger scale—we have thousands of NPCs living for real, even far away from the player. But with the eagle, you can witness that, so you can see opportunities at a much bigger scale and decide what to do. So, for example, you could witness crocs attacking soldiers, soldiers killing each other, with your eagle. See some loot over there? Just tag it, it'll stay. It's persistent." I don't know that tagging enemies with the eagle is any more fun than just using eagle vision from the older games, but it's also not her only use—upgrading the eagle (ah, videogames) lets you use her to distract and even attack enemies.

In the first part of the hands-on demo, I use Senu to tag enemies on two ships. I sneak on board one of them. Climbing up to the mast, I use Bayek's bow to light an arrow on a torch, then launch it at a nearby enemy. I jump off, then clear the rest of the ship with one scrappy duel, followed by a few stealth kills.

The object I'm looking for, a gold statue, is actually at the bottom of the water. Bayek has a kind of sonar ability to spot loot in the environment, so I use that to find it, and dive to the bottom to retrieve it. I'm encouraged by the developer leading my hands-on to scan for loot as I walk through the demo, but I can't say I find the idea of doing that throughout the game to be particularly enticing.

Returning the statue to its owner, the innocent man is nonetheless killed by a member of the local law enforcement. Bayek takes issue with this, and a fight kicks off—I kill him. *Assassin's Creed* has taken some inspiration from RPGs. Each kill adds to an experience bar, and levelling up lets you spend points across three areas on a skill graph: Combat, stealth, and then ancillary abilities that manipulate the world, like poisoning people, taming animals, or accelerating time.

## I LEARN THE SECRET TO BEATING EVERY ONE OF THESE FIGHTERS: MASHING DODGE

The melee combat of *Origins* has taken on more of a *Dark Souls* flavor. There's a dodge button, and battles have more of a duel quality. Enemies actually have hitboxes for the first time in the series, instead of kills being made by scripted animations. While it's certainly different to *Assassin's Creed's* almost self-playing combat that I'm tired of, I'm not sure I actually like it.

The gladiatorial arena throws three waves of opponents at me, followed by a boss fight. There are these spinning blades dotted around, which damage Bayek, but also his enemies if you manage to push them there. I die a couple of times, before I learn the secret to beating every one of these fighters: Mashing the dodge button. I hit one guy, dodge away as he fights back, then go in for another hit with my axe. I do this, and not much else, to wipe out the waves of ordinary enemies. You have both a light and heavy attack, the heavy being useful for knocking down shield-wielding opponents.

### THE DULLEST DUEL

The encounters just feel too long—all the enemies have about twice as much health as they should, and there don't seem to be many options to strategize in combat other than switching weapons on the fly, and a bonus attack that charges up. Ubisoft later tell me that tools like smoke bombs will make a return, though. Fighting the arena's final boss, a brutish slaver, is not a particularly difficult test of my skills. I just mash dodge again, and the boss fight ends as the guy runs into these spinning blades in the arena, presumably a sign that this is still a pretty early build. You then have the option to spare or kill him. It doesn't make a great first impression.

The combat might be different to the largely automated-feeling counter-based battles of previous *Assassin's Creed* games, but the net result isn't necessarily an improvement. It's no good having prolonged duels if there's little tension in the actual fight.

*Assassin's Creed Origins* is different in some ways, but at least in this 25-minute demo, it feels like far from a revamp. There is a gigantic world out there, though, and you just can't get a sense of that in a brief demo. I haven't even slid down a pyramid yet, or climbed up the face of the Sphinx. I'm certainly willing to give it a few more hours to win me over—I was just hoping that *Origins* would feel like a triumphant return straight off the bat.

**Samuel Roberts**



Forget Batman vs Superman, this is the dream match-up.



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The pharaohs built these for the purposes of sliding.







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**BAD DIPLOMACY**

It won't go down well, but you can steal other countries' monuments by sending a spy to take them. I'm shown the Statue of Liberty as an example, and there are 17 in total. Each one applies a different bonus to your state.

**ARCHIPELAGO**

You govern over multiple islands, rather than just one. You'll have to create transport between them so your workers can get to areas as required, like this little volcanic island over here.

**NEED TO KNOW****RELEASE**

2018

**PUBLISHER**

Kalypso

**DEVELOPER**

Limbic Entertainment

**LINK**[www.limbic-entertainment.de](http://www.limbic-entertainment.de)**TROPICO 6****FIRST  
LOOK**

Stealing the Statue of Liberty, in the name of El Presidente

**EL PRESIDENTE REMEMBERS**

There are 15 singleplayer missions in *Tropico 6*, framed by a device where El Presidente is telling stories as a kind of unreliable narrator.

**T**ropico returns in beautiful fashion with the sixth game. The scope of it has widened, as this image suggests—you now manage a whole set of islands, and are responsible for ferrying people between them, maintaining their happiness and thriving as a nation. You've got over 150 unique buildings in *Tropico 6*, but here are some of the other major changes that are worth shouting about.

*Samuel Roberts*



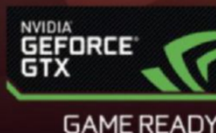
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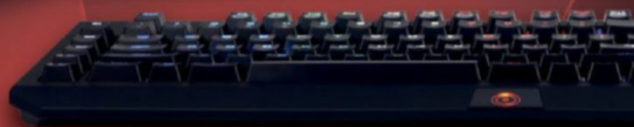


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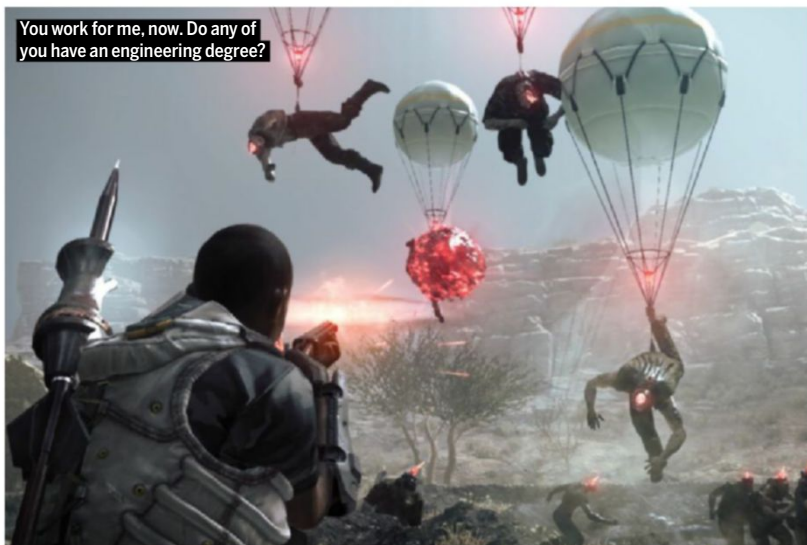
# PREVIEW

It's not a *Metal Gear* without unfeasible mechs.



Choose a mix of melee and shooter loadouts.

You work for me, now. Do any of you have an engineering degree?





## Metal Gear Survive



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2018DEVELOPER  
KonamiPUBLISHER  
In-houseLINK  
[www.konami.com/mg/survive](http://www.konami.com/mg/survive)METAL GEAR  
SURVIVE

No Kojima, no problem?

**M**etal Gear Survive is great fun, and I'm only as far as the co-op lobby. Here, you and three buddies get to dick around with all your characters' gear. I'm the first to work out you can shell other players with mortar fire. I run away from my comrades, and let rip. The mortar whistles down and knocks two of them off their feet, and I burst out laughing.

I then jog over to punch one of the other players in the back of the head, but fall over in an oil slick another player has laid down. Standing up, someone else hits me from behind. A teammate then mortars me, and I fall over. An ironic punishment.

That was the most fun lobby ever, then, and the demo makes a pretty good first impression, too. The inventory controls for *Survive* are slightly too busy. Different d-pad buttons give you access to weapons or objects like fences and gadgets, and it's difficult to remember which button does what. But the amount of options open to you is impressive.

This is a wave-based mode, where we need to hold off enemies for three rounds and protect a wormhole generator in the center of a base. I put up fences to cover gaps in the base's walls, then climb up to a vantage point and prepare for them to arrive. Lots of *Survive*'s basic zombie men, the headless Wanderers, shamble towards our base, and I efficiently pick them off with machine gun fire, while the others man different sides of the base. Ammo is scarce, and I somehow end up

using all of it in this one round and switch to my character's bow.

When the next round starts, I shoot arrows to hold off a few zombies, although a new enemy type is hanging around—Bombers, which have big exploding heads. This is when I set up one of my mortar launchers, this time not for the purposes of trolling my teammates for cheap comedy. I carefully line up shots into the Wanderers' paths, and a lot of them go down. We still keep the zombies at bay and the wormhole generator is untouched, but one of the fences was torn down in that last round. I replace it.

A quick sidequest pops up between rounds: Leave the base, kill some enemies, and you're rewarded with a mech walker. I take this, and it feels very *Metal Gear-y*. When the enemies come, I'm patrolling the perimeter of the base. The mech's chaingun makes me feel overpowered, and it's easy to smack down the Wanderers with its melee attack. While I feel I'm doing a great job, the enemies have made it through the fences, and are attacking the generator, suggesting my teammates are a bit rubbish. I hop off the mech and help repel the invaders, who have smashed down the fences we put up. The round's over and we win. The last moments were incredibly tense and enjoyable, and I forgot how refined every combat interaction is in *Metal Gear*. All of that carries over to *Survive*.

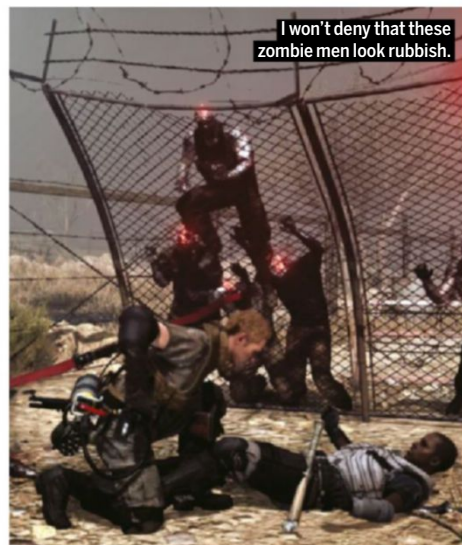
PLAYED  
IT

## GROAN SURVIVOR

For scoring the highest in our team, I get a crafting recipe for a rare battle sickle. Crafting systems are almost always rubbish, but for the purposes of trying out a bunch of new tools in *Metal Gear*, it might be worth it. A Konami rep tells me we can expect to see fun nods to the series in the items you'll be able to craft.

I enjoyed the demo. It's close enough to *MGSV* that it's hard not to get excited about the fluid controls and loadout customization. I think of it as novelty DLC for *MGSV*, and I feel good on the inside. Here's my prediction: *Survive* won't be nearly as good as *The Phantom Pain*, but it will exceed most people's expectations. And I'll have the best time slinging mortars at Phil Savage in the lobby.

Samuel Roberts

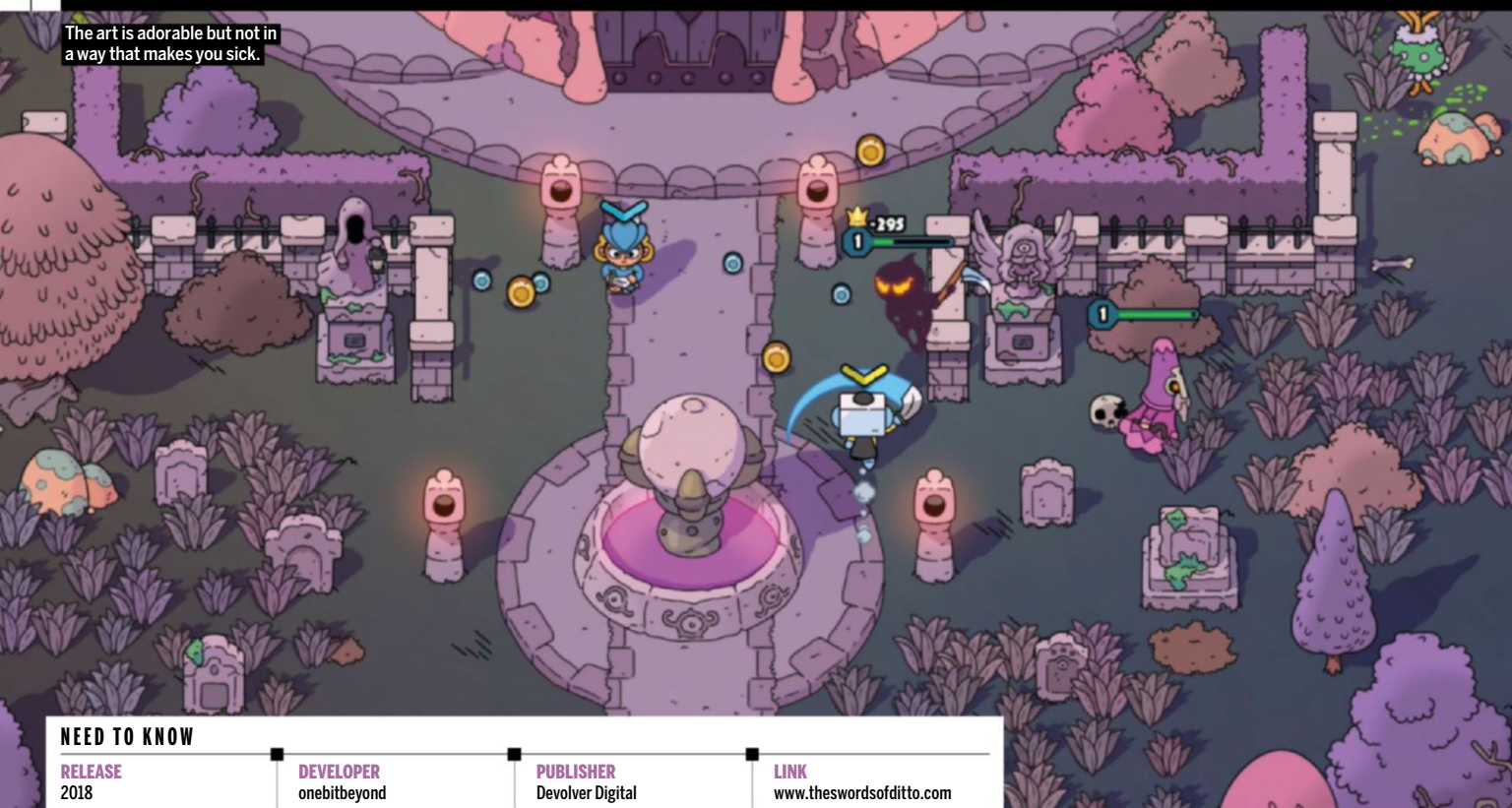


I won't deny that these zombie men look rubbish.

**IT'S HARD NOT TO GET EXCITED ABOUT THE FLUID CONTROLS AND LOADOUT CUSTOMIZATION**



The art is adorable but not in a way that makes you sick.



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2018

DEVELOPER  
onebitbeyond

PUBLISHER  
Devolver Digital

LINK  
[www.theswordsofditto.com](http://www.theswordsofditto.com)

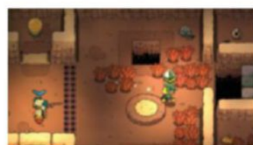
# THE SWORDS OF DITTO

Swap boomerangs for vinyl records in this Zelda-alike

**R**andomly generated co-op *Zelda* is the simplest way to describe *The Swords of Ditto*. Your character wakes up on a beach and heads into a nearby town, where a statue of the island's hero stands. You claim the hero's sword, and become the Sword of Ditto (this being the setting of the game). Along with an optional buddy, you take part in a truncated *Zelda* adventure. If you succeed in defeating the boss, Mormo, your character becomes the hero statue in your next playthrough.

PLAYED IT

*The Swords of Ditto* is a roguelike, then, and if you fall short in defeating Mormo, your equipment from a previous playthrough appears at a lonely grave instead. I'm delighted – I've always wanted to pass my failures onto another generation. Like most roguelikes, every run is randomly generated, so each playthrough feels like a different challenge. Succeeding leaves the world in a bright and happy place. Fail multiple



times, though, and the world will grow a bit darker around you. I only played one game of *Swords of Ditto*, so I'm interested to how this change manifests itself.

The sword and bow are familiarly *Zelda*-y, but there are newer tools due to the contemporary fantasy setting. Ditto's version of a boomerang is a vinyl record, which is thrown as a frisbee disc, and I'm shown some neat puzzles in a dungeon where you have to activate switches by carefully aiming the record through gaps in walls. You can also set it on fire and throw it through enemies to spread the flames, giving the world a neat bit of reactivity. My favorite ability is summoning a giant foot to squish and knock back nearby enemies, almost certainly a Monty Python reference.

## MY FAVORITE ABILITY IS SUMMONING A GIANT FOOT TO SQUISH ENEMIES

There's also an armor system, represented by stickers which give you particular buffs. I found *Swords of Ditto* a little harder and more frantic in combat encounters than I expected based on my preconceptions of the visual style, so the gathering of stickers and passing them down between heroes should be important. Each playthrough will last for around two hours, which sounds pretty spot-on to me.

## COUCH QUEST

The art reminds me a bit of Double Fine's *Costume Quest*, only more storybook-y. I've seen it compared to *Adventure Time*, too, which has a similar color palette and maybe some crossover in tone. Quietly, it was an E3 favorite of mine.

Like a few indies I've recently enjoyed, it's a fresh-feeling modern version of a game type I've appreciated in the past. The way the world is presented makes *Ditto* easy to like: it's cutesy without being saccharine, which is a hard balance to pull off. And your PC always needs more great couch co-op games.

*Samuel Roberts*



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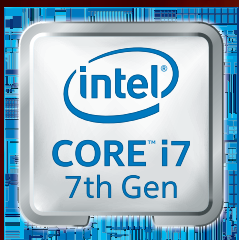
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*Life is Strange: Before the Storm*

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
August 31DEVELOPER  
Deck NinePUBLISHER  
Square EnixLINK  
[www.lifeisstrange.com](http://www.lifeisstrange.com)LIFE IS STRANGE:  
BEFORE THE  
STORMIt's a surprisingly faithful return  
to Arcadia Bay in this prequel

**O**ut of all the games I imagined losing myself in during 2015, the smart money wasn't on one about a time-traveling college student. *Life is Strange* told a melancholy story about ordinary people in a small Pacific Northwest town, where you could control time in the present, even if you were unable to correct what happened to its characters in the past. It was well written and confidently stylized, and it clearly tapped into a kind of drama that people wanted from their games.

Square Enix is revisiting Arcadia Bay in this prequel. Picking through the bones of the original game doesn't immediately sound like a good idea, but *Before the Storm* makes a good first impression. With a proper second season from developer Dontnod already in the works—hopefully with new characters in a different scenario—this comes from a separate team.

Revisiting Arcadia Bay, Deck Nine rewinds the clock back three years in *Before the Storm*, putting players in the shoes of a pre-punk Chloe. With Max out of the picture, the first big change is the absence of any time manipulation powers. Here, Chloe is still just as bold as ever, and players will have to think carefully before committing to a game-changing decision.

My demo opens with Chloe trying to win cool points by breaking into a hardcore gig. Immediately, I'm faced with a choice—do I steal cash from the merch

FIRST  
LOOK

table, or sneak in? I steal the money. And after walking around the venue wide-eyed, it's obvious that Chloe doesn't know Black Flag from the Black Eyed Peas.

Chloe then spots Frank, the drug dealer from the first game. Trying to score weed, players are faced with an option—pay off Chloe's existing debt to Frank, or just borrow more. Like the last game, the choices available to you often stem from the consequences of previous actions. As Chloe stole the cash, the player can use it to pay off the debt and keep us in Frank's good books, so that's what I chose.

In *Life Is Strange*, Max's love for photography resulted in photo ops as you wandered the world. Here, Chloe's penchant for anarchy sees her able to draw graffiti that remains in the game world instead. After leaving her mark on a nearby circular saw, Chloe runs toward the moshpit, accidentally spilling the drink of a mean-looking man. He sneers and attempts to hit on her, and I choose to give him a sassy response. Predictably, this drunk isn't delighted by Chloe's reply. Brushing him off, she runs, finding her way round to a podium overlooking the stage.

Before she can enjoy the band's set, she finds herself cornered by the soggy assailant, coming at her with a broken bottle. Luckily, a quick punch arrives just in time to stop him.

Chloe's savior turns out to be the first game's missing girl, Rachel Amber.

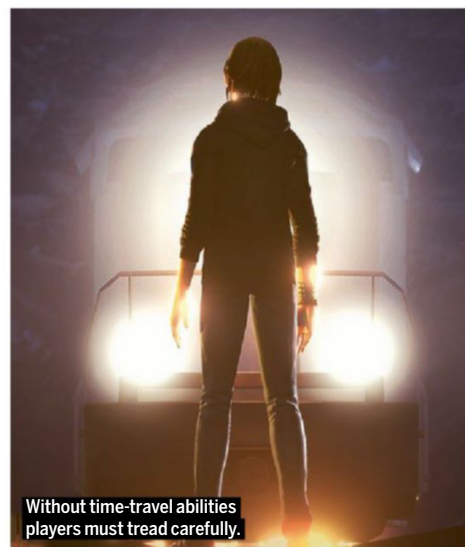
## ARCADIA BAE

The final section of the demo sees Chloe and Rachel hanging out. It all takes a turn for the angsty, as the two start to argue in a fashion that feels close to the tone of the original—romantic tension lingers in the air, and you have the option to call it a friendship or something more, to see where it leads. Rachel tells Chloe they can't be friends right now, and there are suggestions of a family secret.

Even without the ability to manipulate time, or Chloe's original voice actress, Ashly Burch, it still feels close enough to *Life Is Strange* in execution that fans will get a kick out of it—even if, presumably, there are only so many ways you can affect the course of the story given that we know what happens. Making it three episodes long seems well judged.

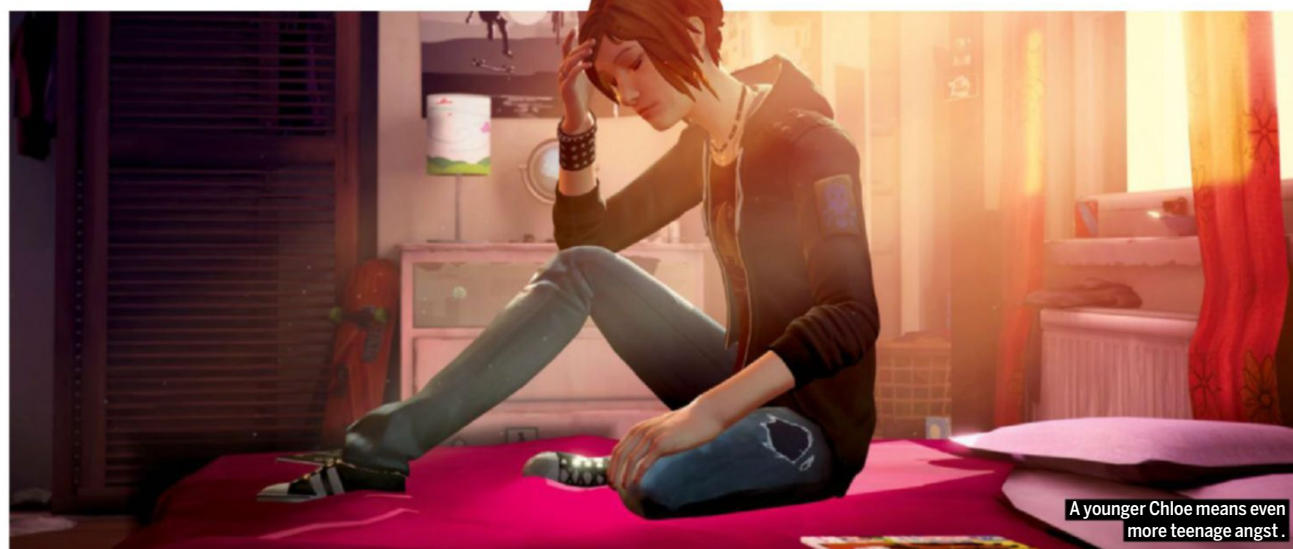
Tom Regan

This prequel reveals more about the mysterious Rachel.



Without time-travel abilities players must tread carefully.

THE FIRST BIG CHANGE IS THE  
ABSENCE OF ANY TIME  
MANIPULATION POWERS



A younger Chloe means even more teenage angst.



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## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2017DEVELOPER  
Pixel SpillPUBLISHER  
GambitiousLINK  
[www.outreachgame.co.uk](http://www.outreachgame.co.uk)

## OUTREACH

## Exploring an abandoned Soviet space station

**Y**ou, a lone Soviet cosmonaut, are sent to investigate a communications blackout on a space station. When you arrive the place is falling apart, the crew is missing, and it's up to you to find out what happened to the station and the workers aboard it. Set in the '80s, *Outreach* fuses real-world history with conspiracy theories. The environments are realistic, modelled on Russia's famous Mir space station, meaning there's no technology that didn't exist at the time. Developer Pixel Spill spent months researching the era, and it shows. Everything from computer consoles to clothing has a feel of authenticity. It's like stepping back in time.

And this realism extends to the way you navigate the station, with zero gravity to deal with. You can push against scenery to propel your body forward, or grab railings to pull yourself along. It's slightly headspinning at first, and adjusting to the fact that there's no up or down takes some getting used to. But when you master it, floating around is a lot of fun. And when you realize that you can grab objects, throw them, and watch them spin through the air realistically, the story will take a temporary backseat as you experiment and play around with the physics. The zero-gravity movement feels just right, which is the result of a lot of painstaking tweaking and adjusting by Pixel Spill.

There's something wonderfully eerie about the lifeless station. Abandoned space stations are nothing new in games, but the realism element in *Outreach*

PLAYED  
IT

makes it feel unique. The chunky tech is reminiscent of *Alien: Isolation*, which Pixel Spill cites as a big influence on the art design. I drift through the station discovering remnants of the mysteriously missing crew: Conversations recorded on cassette tapes, letters, and family photos. I methodically check each and every module for clues, but find nothing. Then I reach a door with a broken handle, meaning I'm going to have to go for a spacewalk to reach the next area.

When I step outside into the expanse of space, the size of the Earth below makes me feel dizzy. The sense of scale is incredible. And while I felt relatively safe in the confines of the station, out here I'm suddenly overwhelmed by dread. A sensation that's justified when I try and leap towards a handrail, only to miss, float helplessly away, and die horribly in the depths of space. This section is remarkably tense, requiring patience, timing, and concentration to carefully grab each rail and pull yourself to a distant airlock. You have to hit the grab button at precisely the right time, otherwise you'll overshoot the rail and drift away from the station with no way to make your way back. I make it eventually, but I die several times in the process. Then, cruelly, the demo ends, and I don't get to see what's inside.

## DEEP SPACE

*Outreach* is fascinating, but my demo leaves me none the wiser about what kind of story it'll tell. Will it be a psychological thriller? Or is there something supernatural going on aboard the station? I'm looking forward to finding out in the finished game. Pixel Spill promises players will "discover the lives and motivations of the crew" and learn about something called Project Outreach, which sounds suitably sinister. The developer also says that you'll uncover "the true nature" of the space station as you explore it, which is filling my head with questions. I'm told the game will be a relatively short experience—maybe three or four hours, the length of a long movie—and I'm okay with that. Short, focused, well-told stories are fast becoming one of my favorite kinds of game on PC, and I hope *Outreach* is one that delivers.

**Andy Kelly**



Whatever you do, don't miss the handrail.

## THERE'S SOMETHING WONDERFULLY EERIE ABOUT THE LIFELESS STATION



It's amazing that a small indie team built all this.



What happened to the missing crew?





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## PREVIEW

Don't expect a cheerful setting, but it's nicer than being underground all the time.



The rare glimpses of the surface were highlights of both *Metro* games.

These irradiated twigs should get the most out of your graphics card.





## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2018DEVELOPER  
4A GamesPUBLISHER  
Deep SilverLINK  
[www.metrothegame.com](http://www.metrothegame.com)

## METRO EXODUS

4A discusses *Stalker's* influence on this partly open world sequel

**M**etro is taking us to the surface. While the horror FPS series is best known for placing you in, well, the metro of Moscow with a few memorable exceptions, this new instalment takes place above ground in Russia. In bringing that setting to life, 4A is embracing the *Stalker* in its DNA.

"The level that we show in the [E3] trailer is later in the game, and is one of our non-linear levels," says executive producer Jon Bloch. "We're doing this mix of classic gameplay and this new non-linear style, and we wanted to maintain what our fans expect, and what they're used to and love, while introducing something new that is blending what we've done over the past two games, plus something that the core team at 4A Games has done in the past with the *Stalker* games. We're not entirely open world, then, it's more sandbox survival, and it is tied together with a storyline that carries the player through. They'll still feel like they're playing a *Metro* game."

After a scrap in a very *Metro*-ish underground setting, that trailer then showed off a gorgeous landscape, where you could see a downed chopper, ruined architecture, and no shortage of bodies. Like in the underground, mutated creatures roam the place, but it's also a more hopeful a setting than 2033 or *Last Light* were. "It's a much brighter journey because after two games in the tunnels, the team was tired of [the setting]," says creative director Andriy 'Prof' Prokhorov.

## FIRST LOOK

*Exodus* takes place on a moving train, over the course of a year. We'll see new parts of Russia over the four seasons and different enemy types. "It's a long journey, so when you get to a new place it'll be a new season," Bloch says. "So you get both a new environment plus a new season and you're meeting new people. There might be new wildlife that lives there, there's going to be different societies, different ideologies, all these different experiences each time you step off the train."

The great bits of storytelling you'd get in *Metro's* populated stations now come in the form of the people on the train, and you'll get to see them develop over the course of a year. "There is a sense of: Let's go see what's out there, and hopefully we'll find something that's new and interesting, and a good place to live," Bloch tells me.

## LEAVING MOSCOW

Going open world was tough. "It was like: 'Yeah, it will be easy,'" Prof says. "We combined the experience of the two projects, our core team's projects, which started with *Stalker*, and after that *Metro*."

"It wasn't as easy as we thought it'd be when we started," Bloch adds.

"Taking those two experiences from the team and putting them together—two years into development, and we were still trying to figure out how to make it work. We have it in a place now where we think it works."

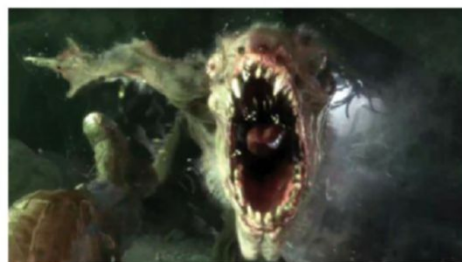
"Having a lot of freedom killed the scenario as far as narrative gameplay is concerned," Prof says. "It was difficult."

The end result should be worth it—the AI's been reworked to provide more player-generated moments, which was less of a consideration when the series was set underground. "When you're walking around one of the non-linear levels, you'll experience them more dynamically than compared to the previous *Metro* games," Bloch says. "But there are still elements that make it feel like a *Metro* game, it doesn't feel too different—there are still combat, survival, exploration elements that we're used to."

Adapting to open world design has been a challenge for 4A Games, but tapping into its *Stalker* expertise is the sort of angle that a new *Metro* needed. I can't wait to see what's beyond Moscow.

*Samuel Roberts*

**IN BRINGING THIS SETTING TO LIFE, 4A IS EMBRACING THE STALKER IN ITS DNA**



# PREPARE TO LAND

Alpha 3.0 is one small step on the path  
to **STAR CITIZEN**'s next giant leap.


*By Christopher Livingston*







'm about to be the first person outside of Cloud Imperium Games to have ever landed a ship on the

surface of a moon in *Star Citizen*. I hope. I'm playing the latest build of the alpha, version 3.0, in a conference room at CIG's studio in Los Angeles, California, and the room is filled with CIG staff members, including founder Chris Roberts, all watching as I slowly, hesitantly descend to the moon's surface. I haven't played *Star Citizen* in months, and with all eyes on me, this feels like a lot of pressure. I realize I'm holding my breath as I inch closer to the moon. "Please," I think. "Don't crash. Not here. Not now." 

It's not easy restricting my talk with Chris Roberts, nor anyone else at CIG, to only what is coming in 3.0. The conversation, like the crowdfunded space sim itself, keeps sprawling farther and wider, to what will be arriving in version 3.1, 3.2 and beyond. One moment I'm being shown the massive scale of the planned universe—stars and planets, asteroid belts and space stations—and the next moment I'm inspecting subtle changes to specific sections of player armor on an artist's monitor as they demonstrate the effects of dirt buildup or tiny scratches and dents from wear and tear. I look at a new capital ship so huge players will be able to land other ships inside it, and then I'm peering at another screen as I'm shown how Mark Hamill's nose was slightly altered on his character's face. *Star Citizen's* development, which began in 2012, is both about the big picture and the tiniest of details.

I'm shown to a desk where a member of the development team is firing a weapon at a vehicle to make sure it breaks apart realistically, then we pause outside an office where a roomful of writers hammer away at thousands of lines of dialogue and hundreds of pages of lore, before we continue on to another desk where the fabric of a new outfit is being tested as the character wearing it

**BELOW:** With the universe expanding, you'll want to bring some friends along.

#### STAGE 1

You'll be able to lock your ship's doors to prevent theft.

#### STAGE 2

Doors can be blown off with explosives, leading to theft.

#### STAGE 3

If your is ship stolen, you'll be able to file an insurance claim.



#### STAGE 4

The stolen ship will be marked as 'hot' and reputable vendors won't buy a hot ship.

#### STAGE 5

Shady buyers, however, might. Or it can be stripped for parts.

#### FULL COVER

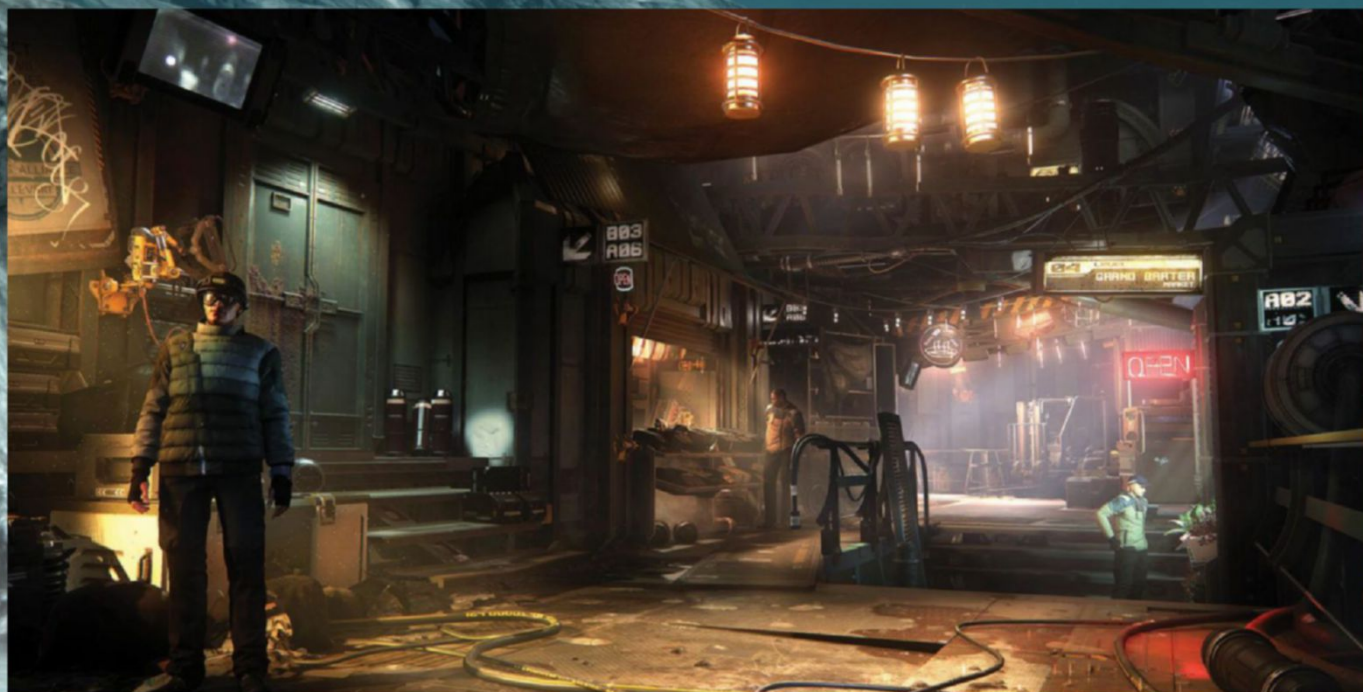
Insurance will replace your stolen ship.

jumps, runs, and crouches. Like the universe itself, everything about *Star Citizen* is in motion, from the same character's earrings—which swing and sway believably as she moves her head—to the orbit of the moon I'm trying to land on.

#### TOUCHDOWN

My ship's landing gear gently connects with the surface of Delmar, one of 3.0's three new moons. The landing gear reacts as I touch down by compressing down and then back up, in a convincing display of hydraulics—another new feature of 3.0. I let out a relieved breath, pleased to not have crashed in front of the audience of expert pilots watching.

Inside the cockpit, in first-person mode, I swivel my head down to look at my control panel, then shut the engines off with a mouse-click on the correct console button. That's another tweak coming in 3.0: The ability to not just turn your head in freelook, but to also interact with objects while doing so. I can open and close doors, cycle airlocks, activate console buttons, even click, hold and drag to adjust my ship's power distribution between shields, weapons, and engines, previously limited to button presses. This feels like a blessed addition, freeing me—an intermittent-at-best *Star Citizen* player—from having to memorize every single binding or keep a guide







**LIKE THE UNIVERSE  
ITSELF, EVERYTHING  
ABOUT STAR CITIZEN  
IS IN MOTION**

open on my second monitor. It also adds a more immersive quality to the environment, the feeling that I'm really interacting with my surroundings by poking a selection of buttons and touching screens with an invisible fingertip.

Another welcome addition to *Star Citizen* sounds minor, but it's wonderful: The ability to change your movement speed while travelling on foot by scrolling the mouse wheel. It was one of the first changes I got to see in 3.0, and I played with it for a while—probably too long, considering I was supposed to be exploring moons, not pacing around the interior of a space station—gradually moving from a slow walk, to a normal strolling pace, to a quickened walk, then to a jog and finally to a run, all by simply rolling the mouse wheel forward. Being able to pick intermediate speeds between a walk and a run makes movement feel much more organic (akin to using a controller's thumbstick for the throttle in a racing game), and the animation smoothly reacts as I change my pace from walking to running and back. You know those games where you're either slightly slower or slightly faster than the NPC you're following around, and you have to keep switching between a walk and a sprint? I can't see it being a problem here.

With my ship now powered down, I climb out of the pilot's seat and stroll (at a pace of my choosing) through the ship to the cargo hold. I lower the ramp, then walk down it and exit onto the surface of the moon of Daymar. It's neither a small step nor a giant leap for me, but more of a medium-sized hop, since I've landed on uneven terrain and the bottom of the ramp is suspended a few feet off the ground. Still, I did it. I landed on a moon, and I'm now standing upon it, finally feeling like a true astronaut in a game that has had, until now,







only a space station to stomp around on. A few dozen meters away lies the wreck of another ship, shattered into several huge pieces. That's what I've come here to find.

## PROCEDURAL ASSISTANCE

As other space games have demonstrated, there's a challenge in delivering players into the massive gaming arena that is an entire universe. With kilometres of a single planet's surface to explore, and hundreds or perhaps even thousands of planets to someday be added to *Star Citizen*, what will make those planets interesting and worth exploring? Procedural generation, as we saw with the vast universe of *No Man's Sky*, can show you something slightly different each time you touch down somewhere, but there's no guarantee that those differences will always (or even often) provide an interesting experience.

"They built a system," Roberts explains of *No Man's Sky*'s developer, Hello Games, "and then they just let the numbers, the math do the talking."

CIG isn't just leaving its moons and planets up to an algorithm. Sean Tracy, Technical Director of Content, calls it "procedural assistance", where math does most of the talking but the team of artists can add their own touches: They can carve canyons, paint features, alter terrain, add flora. I watch as Tracy plants individual trees onto an arid landscape with a brush, then he zooms out until most of the planet is in view and paints great swaths of forests with the same movement. On *Star Citizen*'s moons and planets, certain locations will be randomly generated, while others

will be deliberately created. The maths will get plenty of help.

As the universe of *Star Citizen* expands, players—who currently cluster around the game's massive spaceport—will begin to drift apart from one another, so NPCs will need to take on a bigger role in the drama. A *Shadow of Mordor*-style Nemesis system for NPC enemies is in the works, to lend AI opponents more personality, persistence, and menace. PVE will also expand with more survival elements than simply worrying about oxygen. A stamina system is being added in 3.0, and players will eventually have to eat and drink as well, which means making sure they stock their ships with enough supplies to keep themselves fed and hydrated on their long journeys across the universe. Homesteading will be a possibility,

someday. Players could seek out a remote, unexplored world and set up their own resource-gathering operations or even farms on a planet's surface, carving out both a life and an occupation.

Survival aboard ships will also become more complicated. Roberts' wish is to emulate the situations Han Solo found himself in during space battles, which didn't just involve firing at other ships, but also having to run around the Millennium Falcon during the dogfight, hurriedly making repairs, restoring power, and fixing or replacing ship components. And, like Han, you won't be flying your ship in a bulky armored suit with its own oxygen supply—you won't be able to sit in the pilot's seat without first



### A SHIP FOR KINGS

It's not just the exteriors of the ship that look great in *Star Citizen*—the level of detail inside these vessels is extraordinary.



taking off and storing that armor. If your hull is breached, you'll need to first get your gear back on, then set about restoring life support.

## LANDING GEAR

I'd received my moon-landing mission after first arriving at Levski, which was once a mining facility, but now serves as an outpost on the dwarf-planet-sized asteroid called Delamar. Levski is dug deep into the asteroid's crust, with landing bays that require pilots to descend into the facility through massive horizontal doors (which I did, again, while holding my breath and praying not to crash). I climbed out of my ship and descended into the colony via a series of elevators and staircases as NPCs strolled around, poking my head into weapon shops and crowded bars, pausing from time to time to look out of the windows into the crater and up through the gaping mining cavity at the sky above.

With the shipwreck mission acquired, I returned to my ship and ascended from the Levski landing pad back into outer space, then made a quantum jump to the moon to locate the crashed ship. Now, inside the wreck on Daymar, I inch through the gloomy, ruined ship in first-person mode, gun drawn, torch on. I eventually locate the two dead crew

**LEFT:** Daymar is the largest of Crusader's moons.

**BELOW:** Over time, gear, like armor, will need repairing and replacing.



members I've been tasked to find, thus completing my mission. On my way out back out of the derelict ship, I pick up and carry a small box of cargo. In 3.0, players will be able to loot cargo they find and physically carry it back to their ships, place it in their hold, fly to a space station or outpost, and visit a vendor to sell what they've recovered.

Or, they'll be able to wait near the wrecked ship for other players to remove the cargo and then ambush them in hopes of stealing it. As I'm lugging the pilfered loot back to my ship, two Nox racers appear, skimming across the moon's surface and opening fire. Nox are open-canopy, single-seat hovering speeder bikes, in this case piloted by two members of CIG's staff joining my session from another room in the studio. Their blasters miss me (I'm presuming their aim is so poor not due to lack of skill but out of consideration for their nervous guest) as I unshoulder my railgun, charge it, and fire back. Eventually, mostly due to them politely holding still while I take my sweet time aiming, I manage to take out both Nox speeders.

## CIG ISN'T JUST LEAVING ITS MOONS AND PLANETS UP TO AN ALGORITHM

As the 'enemy' Nox bikes have been destroyed, the developers guide me to an outpost where I can spawn and pilot a racer of my own, so I spend a while skimming Daymar's surface, cresting sand dunes and zipping between boulders like I'm riding an Imperial speeder bike on Endor's moon. Hoverbikes aren't the only new way to explore 3.0's moons: The six-wheeled, six-seater Ursa rover will allow players to trundle around, explore, collect cargo, and drive the rover back onto a ship big enough to accommodate it. I end my session with alpha 3.0 by crashing. It had to happen sometime.

The scope of *Star Citizen* is hard to grasp, from the massive scale of the sprawling universe down to the tiniest dents on an armored chestplate, and the amount of work left to do feels—pardon the pun—astronomical. The changes and additions in the build of 3.0 I played gave me a glimpse of the space sim's future, however, and while the finished game might still be (light) years away, at least now I can feel something solid under my feet. ■

## SPACE BUTT

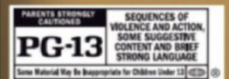
*Star Citizen* used to run on a heavily customized version of CryEngine, and now runs on the similar Amazon Lumberyard tech.





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Robbed of his birthright, Arthur comes up the hard way in the back alleys of the city. Once he pulls the sword from the stone, he must acknowledge his true legacy... like it or not.



★ 2017 ★

**subjective: Each participant picks their personal top 15 games, and then the team gathers to narrow that list. We only allow one entry per series, with a couple of notable exceptions. You'll also find some of our personal picks thrown in. Enjoy.**

100 DWARF  
FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 LAST POSITION ● New

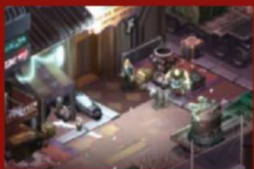
**Wes:** In *Dwarf Fortress* I've seen the circle of death and rebirth. It's less of a game, more of an ambitious simulation, representing the complexities of existence in ASCII. Eventually you'll feel like Neo, seeing the truth behind the symbols. Just remember: Losing is fun.

**Shaun:** You don't even need to play *Dwarf Fortress* to marvel at its achievement. Hell, the patch notes are a marvel of their own.

99 SHADOW TACTICS:  
BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

**Fraser:** In *Shadow Tactics*, every infiltration of an enemy palace or compound is a puzzle overflowing with obstacles. Being sneaky is fun. Being murderous is better. Planning the demise of the game's guards is a singular delight. I'm a fan of the old tanuki distraction method—the little critter distracts a guard by being adorable, while one of my ninjas pounces on him from a roof.

98 SHADOWRUN:  
DRAGONFALL

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ● New

**Jody:** It's funny that one of the few games to get cyberpunk right is also one with elves in it, but *Shadowrun* reduces fantasy and cyberpunk to their essentials, while emphasizing what's best about both. *Dragonfall* is basically *Baldur's Gate 2* with turn-based combat set in near-future Berlin, where hackers and samurai raid corporations and watch a talk show hosted by a dragon. It's as great as it sounds.



97

## FEAR

RELEASED 2005 LAST POSITION ● New

**Andy C:** Combat in *FEAR* is magnificent chaos. Glass shatters, dust billows, and sparks, paper, and body parts fly in loud, explosive gunfights against some of the finest, most believably 'real' AI ever created for an FPS. Enemies flank, they take cover, they chatter, and they toss grenades with infuriatingly good timing and accuracy. But what I love most about it is the way it weaves a genuinely horrific tale through all that action, breaking up the manic combat with intensely disturbing stretches of creepiness, and a few moments worthy of any pure horror game.

**Andy K:** I reinstall *FEAR* at least once a year just to experience that amazing shotgun again. Every shooter has its own unique shotgun, but there's something immensely satisfying about the one in

*FEAR*. How it violently kicks back when you fire it, and the exaggerated way enemies tumble when you shoot them in slow motion. I'm not usually one for fetishizing weapons, but I'll make an exception here.

**Steven:** Speaking of fetishizing guns, how can we not talk about the 10mm HV Penetrator, the gun that fires giant steel stakes and crucifies enemies against walls? I get that *FEAR*'s shotgun deserves a lot of praise, but to me the Penetrator is one of the greatest guns of all time. It's the perfect weapon to use against *FEAR*'s ragdoll enemies. I used the gun so damn much that I feel like whoever had to go through after me and clean up all the dead bodies probably suffered some pretty severe trauma from seeing hundreds of people nailed to cubicle walls.





96

## GRIM FANDANGO REMASTERED

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New

**Tom S:** Manny Calavera is one of the coolest heroes in PC gaming, and he happens to live in one of the coolest worlds in PC gaming. It's a vibrant take on the afterlife, and a great place to set an epic noir love story. Play it and enjoy the jokes.

**Andy K:** I love it when you explore Rubacava in year two. Reading beat poetry at the Blue Casket, listening to Glottis play the piano in Manny's casino. It's like stepping into a classic film noir, albeit one populated by skeletons and giant bees.

### PERSONAL PICK

*Samuel Roberts*



### JAZZPUNK

A funny and weird first-person game that I've recommended to people a lot over the years. It's got loads in common with *Naked Gun* and *Airplane*, in replicating that rapid-fire, sketch-style humor, which is a hard thing to do successfully in a game. It's a true original. I love it.



## 95 METRO LAST LIGHT

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New

**Shaun:** It seems wrong to describe a FPS set in a decrepit metro network as 'beautiful', but *Last Light* manages it. Between the often-unforgiving combat and the light-but-rewarding survival elements, this sequel manages to tell an engrossing tale which isn't at odds with the relentless violence involved.

**Samuel:** Probably my favourite apocalypse in games—it's realistically dour, yet still gorgeous and unsettling.



## 94 SPIDER & WEB

RELEASED 1998 LAST POSITION ● New

**Jody:** This is a free text adventure that begins as a story about a guileless tourist, then frames that as a cover invented by a spy under interrogation, then continues switching between the game you play and the interrogator interrupting to say, "That's not what happened!" Each flashback gets closer to a truth you the player wants to learn, but you the protagonist want to hide. It's clever, twisty, and explosive.

93

## NUCLEAR THRONE

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● 74

**Wes:** Perhaps the greatest use of Early Access as a model for development, *Nuclear Throne* is a punchy top-down roguelike shooter honed over nearly 100 weekly updates. Like the best games of its type, what seems like a simple setup—collect powerful guns, survive randomly generated levels as you progress to a final boss fight—buries hidden stages and characters and secrets to give you the upper hand. The roster of heroes gives

you so many different ways to play. I'm partial to the samurai Chicken, who can briefly survive without his head, and the noob-friendly Crystal, who can reflect bullets. But the real reason to play this over other roguelikes is how great the action feels. It nails that rhythm of explosive action, bullets and enemies flying towards you, with brief moments of respite as you inch towards whatever's around the corner. Action anxiety perfected.



92

## NIDHOGG

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ● New

**Tyler:** The best sickly-looking fencing game there is, *Nidhogg* speeds up the mind games and finesse of *Street Fighter*, chaining tiny, rapid duels between stabby pixel people into hilarious, constantly tense tug-of-war sessions.

**Joe:** Don't let appearances fool you: Beneath the modest veneer lies a deep and engaging versus mode masterpiece. Be it tactful fencing, aerial karate kicking, sword javelin tossing, or turning tail and

running—there's a strategy for everyone as you push your stick-figured foe back one screen at a time, spawning at either side as you die and regenerate, regenerate and die. *Nidhogg* also comes with a less enjoyable singleplayer mode that can be wrapped up inside half an hour. Often hilarious, but equally known to bring out the competitive streak in any payer who enters the fray. Be prepared to lose friends over this one.

### PERSONAL PICK

*Evan Lahti*



### PAPERS, PLEASE

Wielding a rubber stamp, the lowly government drone is cruel or martyrish. Taking bureaucratic paperwork and making it tough, fun, and intensely meaningful is a big achievement. It's as relevant and valuable as ever, in this time of border walls, visa restrictions, and immigration bans.

## PERSONAL PICK

Tom Senior



## EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

It has its issues, but of all the historical *Total War* games this is the one that captures the series' aim: To deliver the ultimate grand strategy game. Whether you're protecting trade routes or rushing cannons to your frontlines, the campaign has an unmatched sense of scale.

## PERSONAL PICK

Chris Livingston



## GARRY'S MOD

Part-sandbox and part-toybox, this is a goofy physics playground for building, destroying, inventing, and collaborating. There are a million things to do and, thanks to hundreds of thousands of custom creations from the community, you'll never run out of entertainment.



91

## KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION ● New

**Fraser:** Everything 'Star Wars' is subverted, the result being one of the franchise's most interesting games.

**Samuel:** As I watch the new films I feel like they're not showing us anything we haven't seen before. Perhaps that's because I've been spoiled by *KOTOR II*, where there's more nuance in the portrayal of the force and memorable characters.

**Wes:** The buggiest game I've ever completed, even with the essential fan patches. Still worth it for Kreia.



## 90 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 LAST POSITION 20

**Evan:** What began as a class-based FPS was transformed into a free-to-play platform for mapmaking, hats, and machinima with a horde mode, events, and a number of bird heads that you can unlock. Valve's learnings from *TF2* helped transform PC gaming at large.

**Phil:** This is the lowest *TF2* has placed on our list by some margin, but that a decade-old multiplayer FPS appears at all is downright heroic. *TF2* is eternal.



## 89 EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION 82

**Andy K:** This makes it into our top 100 every year, with good reason. On paper it sounds boring, but there's something hypnotic about hauling goods across its beautiful recreation of Europe.

**Phil:** I slightly prefer *American Truck Simulator*'s vast, desolate atmosphere, but *ETS2* remains the brighter star, thanks mostly to the size and variety of its continental recreation. This is a huge, relaxing world to travel through.

88

## RESIDENT EVIL 7

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ● New

**Tim:** Few series live long enough to reinvent themselves successfully once, let alone a second time. But that's exactly the dark miracle *Resi* has pulled off—first with *Resi 4*, which redefined its predecessors' clunky third-person exploration into frantic crowd control, and now with this, which has breathed terrifying new life into the haunted house schtick. The switch to first-person, though obvious given the success

of indie shockers like *Outlast* and *Amnesia*, still feels bold and thrilling. Much of that is down to the unhinged Baker family, each of whom must be faced in their own grand encounter, the best of which are frontloaded towards the start of the game. The generic baddies and a undercooked final act let things down, but the sense is still of a series which has, again, found its feet, even if it's still waist deep in oily viscera.

87

## KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 100

**Joe:** The fact that *Kentucky Route Zero* has only launched four of its five chapters speaks volumes for its placing on this list. Here's a game that's yet to be finished, but rubs shoulders with the best PC gaming has to offer. Alongside its cast of idiosyncratic characters, it weaves themes of self-reflection, discovery, and the supernatural into its world. Relatable vignettes and playful metaphors stand before a

stylish art style. Whereas a sense of dread underpins *Acts 1* through *3*, *KRZ*'s penultimate entry eschews its wider picture to focus on the minutiae of each scenario—and its Twain-esque jaunt down the river hones in on the imperfections of your dysfunctional crew. The as-yet unannounced *Act 5* will mark the end of the road for *Kentucky Route Zero*, yet what's come before it is nothing short of wonderful.



# GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION 45

**Phil:** *Guild Wars 2* is what happens when you take over a decade's worth of MMO wisdom and decide to do something better. What if instead of looking for quest givers who ask you to kill ten boars, you collaborated with an entire map to complete objectives that build towards a big boss monster and a chest full of loot? What if instead of being inconvenienced by low-level friends, you were rewarded for partnering up and having a good time? What if instead of paying a subscription, the base game was free? This is one of the most

generous MMOs around, and ArenaNet's experimentation continues, even now. From rebuilding its central city from scratch, to releasing new story chapters, *Guild Wars 2* is always building towards something new and exciting.

**Tom S:** Its dazzling world hosts some of the best combat in the genre. Attacks are template-based and dodging matters. I've had a blast taking on enormous bosses with my necromancer and dozens of other warriors. Its events are huge pile-ons that create amazing spectacles and a sense of community.



## 85 RISING STORM

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 79

**Evan:** It blends fragility and power better than any FPS of its kind. As a Japanese soldier on Iwo Jima, I like to smuggle a MG behind my opponents, get prone, and drop as many unaware attackers as I can. Real war is unfair, and *Rising Storm* manages to make a fun game out of its asymmetries.

**Tyler:** Life in *Rising Storm* is 90% war movie extra and 10% leading role.



## 84 TERRARIA

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 42

**Tom M:** Like the finest wine or the smelliest cheese, *Terraria* keeps on getting better with age. It's staggering to look back at everything that's been added since it launched—a stream of updates has introduced over 3,000 items, new biomes, bosses, and countless other improvements. It's dense with exciting things to do and discover, and there's sure to be even more by this time next year.

# DARKEST DUNGEON

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 53

**Evan:** As you lose men to madness, syphilis, heart attacks, vampiric blood thirst, or other maladies, you'll come to the realization that you shouldn't treat your adventurers as precious assets to be cared for, but as batteries in the shape of men. That gives the game a different emotional texture: You're not a faithful commander, you're a brutal middle-manager. I love its artistic cohesion and the genius use of a single, ominous narrator (Wayne June) throughout the game to set the mood and speak for the characters, enemies, and the dungeon-as-character.



82

## CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 89

**Fraser:** Why is building roads so compelling? There's a lot going on in *Cities: Skylines*, Colossal Order's city builder, but getting the teeming masses to their destinations scratches an itch like nothing else. I'm diversifying into blimps now. Seeing my citizens politely queuing up in their thousands to take to the skies makes me a happy mayor. Sure, I had to bulldoze a school to make room for one of the stations, but now all the children are being educated by floating billboards.

**Phil:** Fraser's populace is doing a lot better than the occupants of my last town, many of whom died after a sewage disaster. But when I'm not battling a tide of brown water, I love the degree of fine-tuning that *Cities: Skylines* supports. The zoning system is inspired—enabling experimentation by letting you earmark a part of your town for farming, nightlife, or legal weed use.



### 81 KILLING FLOOR 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

**Evan:** Flick an RPG into a crowd of zeds, and watch intestines, bile, and whole torsos vomit out the blast radius. It's zombie bowling made by gun nerds, with gaming's best slow-motion inviting you to savor every frame.

**Hannah:** Is there a game that makes tearing apart monstrosities as fun as *Killing Floor 2*? It's the best and most surprisingly diverse horde mode anyone's ever made.



### 80 MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION ▼ 22

**Chris L:** The ultimate game for popping in for a few minutes and then looking around blearily when you realize a dozen hours have passed. Its world can be whatever you want it to be: a singleplayer crafting and exploration game, or a multiplayer sandbox experience. Throw in thousands of mods, custom games, and speciality servers, and the near-infinite world of *Minecraft* gets even bigger.

79

## WARHAMMER: END TIMES—VERMINTIDE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ● New

**Matthew:** This is more than *Left 4 Dead* with ratmen—a characterful recreation of The Old World you'll want to stop and explore (though the rats *will* devour you). Each character is a distillation of a Warhammer race, and watching them interact is a treat. The humor contrasts nicely with the hopelessness of it all.

**Evan:** It's a Warhammer B-movie in the best way possible.





78

## NETHACK

RELEASED 1987 LAST POSITION ● New

**Wes:** Roguelike once literally meant 'like the game *Rogue*', the ASCII dungeon crawler made for '80s mainframes. But most modern roguelikes owe more to its descendant *Nethack*, released in 1987. The simple graphics allow for a deep dungeon crawler. Why pick a lock when you can kick down a door? Why eat a pie when you can use it to blind an enemy? If you value mystery and discovery in games, nothing does them better than *Nethack*. Play online on [nethack.alt.org](http://nethack.alt.org) to encounter the remains of other players who never made it out of the dungeon's depths.

### PERSONAL PICK

Tim Clark



### DON'T STARVE

I don't play Klei's Goth whimsy survive-'em-up nearly as much as I used to, but I'm not sure I'll ever feel as attached to anything as I did to my 300-day-old dream camp. Before the Meat Effigy catastrophe ended it all. The expansions add plenty of value, too.



## 77 OVERCOOKED

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

**Evan:** The best same-screen co-op game on PC. This would be higher if it worked well as a singleplayer game.  
**Phil:** Shamefully, I have watched a lot of Hell's Kitchen USA. *Overcooked* is like if Ramsey's competition was more cartoony and collaborative, with less swearing—most of the time. Success requires coordination of resources and time—which almost always results in glorious culinary chaos.



## 76 DOOM II

RELEASED 1994 LAST POSITION 69

**Chris L:** Rather than trying to reinvent the original, *Doom II* just gave us a heavier dose of everything we wanted: More monsters and bigger levels. It's still an utter blast to play.  
**Phil:** *Doom II* boasts incredible mod support. You can warp the campaign with over-the-top effects, or you can enjoy the many total conversions, from the *The Adventures of Square*, to the incredible *WolfenDoom*.

75

## SUNLESS SEA

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New

**Fraser:** In *Sunless Sea*, you get a vulnerable ship and a sinister ocean to explore. There's action, trading and permadeath, but what really defines Failbetter's nautical romp is the exceptional writing. It jumps between whimsy and menace. One moment you're solving a dispute between rats and guinea pigs, the next your crew are eating each other. It's a game about crafting weird, tragic stories. The captain-turned-spy who

made one too many enemies in the east. The explorer who risked everything to climb out of the Unterzee and back to the surface. There are countless paths, all leading to strange places.

**Andy K:** The mystery of what lies on each island is what keeps me pushing through the many hardships. A gruelling game, but worth enduring for the wonderful stories you're told whenever you dock somewhere.

74

## VVVVVV

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ● New

**James:** You flip gravity (by pressing the V key) to bounce up and down between the floor and ceiling avoiding spikes (they look like this: VVVVVV) while exploring a psychedelic 8-bit open world in pursuit of your friends, Violent, Vermillion, Victoria, Verdigris, and Vitellary. Developer Terry Cavanagh created VVVVVV as an experiment in level design—abilities never change, but how surfaces behave and the

conditions of the world change constantly. In one stretch, thin lines throw you about like gravity-defying trampolines, and in another the level scrolls on its own, forcing you to think quickly. In one lonely corner of the map, a massive elephant cries. All you can do there is frown. But it's hard to stay down with such a buoyant soundtrack. It's one earworm after another, an assembly of upbeat, catchy chiptunes that still haunt me today.

### PERSONAL PICK

Jody Macgregor



### THE WALKING DEAD

I gave up on the comic, don't watch the show, and I'm fussy about adventure games. But I love *The Walking Dead*, because it replaces puzzles with choices and lets me make altruistic, hopeful ones in contrast to most zombie fiction's cynicism. Also, I cried at the end.



## PERSONAL PICK

Fraser Brown



## BLACK DESERT ONLINE

This is an MMO, so I should be in a cave murdering things, but instead I'm spending my days bossing my workers about, taking jaunts across the world with my loaded cart, and selling booze. Murdering monsters and helping NPCs are only side jobs. It's wonderful.

## PERSONAL PICK

Katharine Byrne



## STEAMWORLD HEIST

*SteamWorld Heist* is a true masterstroke. While its wily cast of robotic space pirates do much of the heavy lifting, the ability to aim and fire in real-time, pulling off trickshots, elevates this above the competition. Did we mention there were also collectible hats?



73

## LADYKILLER IN A BIND

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION New

**Hannah:** When I say *Ladykiller in a Bind* is a NSFW visual novel about horny teenagers, there's probably a certain image people imagine—crude, poorly written, and often embarrassing. *Ladykiller In A Bind* goes against that with smart writing, enjoyable characters, and lifelike depictions of intimacy (or, the chaos of it). It's aware of the stereotype, and so does its best to dismantle it by portraying those teenage years with the maturity of a game designed for those a little older.



72 FALLOUT

RELEASED 1997 LAST POSITION New

**Jody:** The original *Fallout* nailed an atmosphere of black comedy, combining post-apocalyptic grit with goofy retrofuturism. It also nailed the RPG standard of having three solutions to a problem, but where other games went with 'violent', 'sneaky', and 'magical' solutions, *Fallout* replaced the third option with 'diplomatic'. It's as good a game about talking your way out of trouble as has ever been made.



71 VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION 49

**Tom M:** Even though it arrived on PC late, *Valkyria Chronicles* is still one the freshest takes on a strategy game I've seen. It's a mix of turn-based strategy, third-person shooter and JRPG that, against all odds, comes together to form an cohesive whole. The art style and melodramatic story don't scream 'hardcore strategy', but underneath all that is a one-of-a-kind tactics game that shouldn't be overlooked.

70

## BASTION

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION New

**Jody:** *Bastion* is an action RPG with trimmings so wonderful we sometimes overlook the strong combat at its center. You carry two weapons, and each is balanced for multiple situations. Control schemes can be tweaked, and the challenge shrines are a neat way of tweaking difficulty. Those trimmings are wonderful, though: The city that rebuilds itself, the narrator who responds to your actions, the perfect soundtrack and the story

that reaches a genuinely affecting conclusion. **Phil:** The worldbuilding is exceptional—and not just in the immediate sense, as levels tend to literally build themselves around you. The songs the characters sing are pulled from the history of the world Supergiant has created, and imbued with a deeper meaning that feeds back into the more immediate story. It really helps sell the emotions behind the drama that unfolds.



69

## N++

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION New

**Shaun:** Ah, the primal gaming pleasure of running and jumping one's way to the end of a level. That's essentially all you do in *N++*, but it's incredible just how varied this platformer feels, despite having over 1,500 levels and an artstyle as barebones as they come. The star attraction of the *N* series—which started off as a Flash game—has always been the floaty movement of its stick-figured ninja, who feels so good to direct that

it barely matters how many thousands of times you'll die. And while it's true that 'running' and 'jumping' is basically all you do in *N++*, it's the subtlety in the way these actions are executed that matters—momentum and timing is important, but crucially, luck never is. Add to all this a cooperative mode and a level editor, and it feels like *N++* is just about the last twitch platformer we'll ever need. Or, at least, it seems a tough task to top it.



68

## SYSTEM SHOCK 2

RELEASED 1999 LAST POSITION  New

**Andy C:** This has everything: Guns, hacking, frightening enemies, a tale of betrayal, a pumping soundtrack, ambiance, and a villain who makes the greatest videogame entrance ever. Throw on one of the updated texture packs, and you've got a game that's as brilliant now as it was in 1999.

**Tom S:** The enemy models aren't chilling now, but the sense of struggle is intact. The Von Braun is still an interesting place to master, and the splicing of shooter/RPG systems just works. Games like *Dishonored* have since taken the formula to new heights, but even

that game can't match the tension of this ingenious original.

**Samuel:** I wouldn't recommend that someone plays *System Shock 2* over *BioShock* now. That's a better and more refined game in a bunch of different ways. I disagree with Tom on the scare factor, though—the primitive animation and sound design make the enemies nice and scary to me, even now.

**Phil:** Part of what makes that so effective is the soundtrack is one of the great '90s videogame scores. Sparse and creepy, it's instrumental in defining *System Shock 2*'s style.



67 FEZ

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION  55

**Phil:** A relaxing platformer that's filled with fiendish secrets. On the surface, *Fez* is a charming game about rotating a 2D world to complete puzzles and create new routes. But scratch beneath its surface, and *Fez* reveals its heart. You'll translate languages, decode runes, and break through the fourth wall. It's meticulously constructed, and all set to a soundtrack that builds a lasting, memorable sense of place.



66 PLANTS VS ZOMBIES

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION  New

**Chris L:** Charming, challenging, and endearing, defend your home from zombies with an army of deadly plants—like corn cannons, exploding cherries, and hypnotic mushrooms. It's masterfully balanced, introducing new threats and defenses at the perfect pace that brings what at times feels like a casual and colorful war to a nail-biting conclusion. *PvZ* is tower defence at its finest and funniest.



65 BURNOUT PARADISE

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION  66

**Hannah:** Which *Burnout* game is the best is a tricky topic, but I'm adamant it's *Burnout Paradise*. A great variety of streets to race down, loads of cars to unlock and, oh baby, the destruction when a car gets wrecked. Wheels bend into the wrong directions, metal shards ping off, all in glorious slow motion. The regular obliteration of cars is the icing on the cake to the most well designed arcade driving game ever.

64 **PILLARS OF ETERNITY**

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION 59

**Joe:** With a wonderful story that's bolstered by an intuitive battle system, *Pillars of Eternity* echoes roleplaying stalwarts such as *Icewind Dale*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Fallout*. A classic.

**Andy K:** As someone who grew up with Infinity Engine RPGs, playing something that captures their distinctive magic, but with a modern sheen, was a delight. Deep, rich, and compelling, roleplaying on PC doesn't get much better.

63 **MAX PAYNE 2**

RELEASED 2003 LAST POSITION New

**Samuel:** There's not a single cover shooter around that's more fun than Remedy's bullet time sequel, in my opinion (there's perhaps an argument for *Vanquish*). Diving into every enemy-filled room with two pistols blazing is like a puzzle to solve, and the sound design and feedback of the guns is terrific. Its noir styling is at once ironic and sincere, and I still love it. You can put *Gears of War* in the bin, thanks.

62 **ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST**

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION New

**Katharine:** The cute critters in Moon Studio's platformer will make you go d'aww almost as often as the nails hard platforming makes you go arghhh. Its Studio Ghibli-esque animation and soaring soundtrack are both top of their class, and the ability to slingshot Ori off enemy attacks brings something genuinely new to the platforming table, making me very excited for its upcoming sequel.



61

**UNDERTALE**

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION 92

**Matthew:** There's something about *Undertale*'s subversive, retro take on the top-down RPG that sweeps you up and takes you back to a place that's half nightmare, half adventure. It recalls the best and worst of fairy tales—a mix of excitement and understated menace—and it's brought to life by a smart sense of humor that makes the whole thing strangely relatable. It's particularly essential for anyone who's skipped classic games for fear of standardized JRPG tropes—turn-based combat is tweaked with bullet hell minigames and you can bond with the monsters you face in battle instead of straight-up slaughtering them in cold blood. The sacred foundation stones of an entire genre are smashed and rebuilt into something genuinely unique, and the result is a game that anyone can engage with. It's a strange, wonderful, and curiously nostalgic experience: However old you are, playing *Undertale* will make you feel like a plucky youngster trying *EarthBound* for the first time.

**Steven:** I absolutely adore *Undertale*'s combat system. It's often overshadowed by the story and characters, but as someone who knows the pain of sitting through yet another turn-based fight with the same enemies, *Undertale*'s combat never feels like a slog. It's a system on par with *Super Mario RPG* for the SNES, where every attack and block can double its efficacy by carefully timed button presses. But in *Undertale*, you move a little heart around bullet hell minigames, transforming the combat from a passive experience into an active one. Turn-based combat systems are historically all about rolling dice and thinking one step ahead, but again *Undertale* subverts expectations while still feeling true to the source material.

**Tyler:** It's about fandom and death of the author, self-interested themes that could've made for an indulgent misery. But love for games flows through *Undertale*, and it instantly endeared itself to me. Run from almost every game that parodies games except for this one.





60

## PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 LAST POSITION 34

**Tyler:** This should be higher. Maybe it will be, next year, after I launch a campaign to force everyone affiliated with PC Gamer to play the remastered version—which, thankfully, doesn't tamper with a single line of dialogue. *Torment* is a witty, weird RPG that emphasizes story and dialogue, and is filled with events that feel like they could've been made up by a clever DM on the spot. I remember, early on, how you can let an embalmer who thinks you're a zombie fill you with stitches—increasing your max HP.



## 59 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION 68

**Leif:** *WoW* has some fantastic competition these days, but it remains the MMORPG in the mind of the public at large. And rightly so. Blizzard's behemoth is a world not just in terms of space, but also in how successfully it's evolved after weathering more than a decade of shifting tastes and audiences. Be it in dungeons, PVP, or thrashing Alliance in the Temple of Kotmogu, it's still easy to find the fun.



## 58 CIVILIZATION VI

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION New

**Evan:** Through its Districts system, *Civ VI* made city planning matter. I like having to think long-term about each tile placement. Hopefully religion and espionage will get deeper.

**Tyler:** When *Civ V* came out, everyone, including me, said that *Civ IV* is better. The same is happening with *Civ VI* and *Civ V*, but with full mod support and the city planning Evan mentioned, which I love, *Civ VI* is the one to play now.

57

## THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

RELEASED 2002 LAST POSITION 44



**Leif:** It may be a fantasy RPG, but it shoves bearded wizards and stodgy castles aside in favor of an alien wonderland resembling fever dream during a mind meld of Frank Herbert and Frank Frazetta. But looks alone don't secure its legacy, as funky as its mushroom towers and racist elves may be. Its greatness lies in how thoroughly it wrapped us in its weird world, forcing us

to remember details from tomes and chats to see the saga to its end.

**Matthew:** I'm still sad I can't experience it all over again. For me, no other *Elder Scrolls* game has come close to delivering a story with the scale and nuance of *Morrowind*, and the setting is the most vivid. A dense, generous, deliciously compelling RPG (with the best giant mushrooms in gaming).

56

## COMPANY OF HEROES

RELEASED 2006 LAST POSITION 84

**Tom S:** A World War II RTS that distills the noise and fury of Saving Private Ryan into a clinical game of take and hold. The first *Company of Heroes* is still a design peak for Relic. The asymmetrical power curves of the Axis and Allied forces create an absorbing tug-of-war. In a long-fought game infantry armies give way to tank warfare, and the destructible maps are gradually leveled. There's a sense of escalation to

every fight, and the campaign features some of the best levels Relic has ever made. I keep coming back to it every year to see if it has faded yet, and it still hasn't happened. It looks great for an 11-year-old game, and sounds incredible, too. The unit barks are baked into my mind, but the chatter still gives the battlefield a sense of life, and the ker-chunk discharge of a tank's main weapon is as impactful today as ever.

### PERSONAL PICK

Hannah Dwan



### TIS-100

Zachtronics designs the most impressive puzzle games around—*TIS-100* is its greatest success. Design algorithms using logic and computing to fit a solution: It's smart in a way that can only work with plain logic puzzles. It also pushed me towards learning about actual computing!

### PERSONAL PICK

Andy Kelly



### HACKNET

One of the best sims of 'movie hacking' on PC. An elegant command line interface and imaginative mission design makes cracking into these systems a joy. One minute you're stealing a recipe from a restaurant chain, the next you're battling a rival hacker for control of your system.

## PERSONAL PICK

Joe Donnelly



## FOOTBALL MANAGER 2017

I've played *Football Manager* on and off for close to 20 years now, and I enjoy it more with each iteration. *FM* is the quintessential football simulator that's as much about multilayered micromanagement as it is about winning trophies and signing your boy or girlhood heroes.

## PERSONAL PICK

Matthew Elliott



## FRIDAY THE 13TH

Right now, *Friday the 13th* is the only thing I want to play. I'll admit that it's hilariously shabby, but with the right group of people it's impossible to stop playing. Every failed escape attempt keeps me coming back, and every game is different. It's an enthralling and violent game of hide-and-seek.

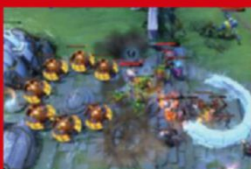


55

## ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION 43

**Evan:** When I think of *Arma*, I think of the photos of soldiers goofing off inside their FOB. They do it, I'd guess, to alleviate the tension of fighting. *Arma* is authentic because it recreates that need for silliness to balance its seriousness. Its need for tactics and fidelity demand some amount of military lingo, compasses, maps, and an eye for spotting enemies. But, inevitably, someone will do something stupid: Barrel rolling their Little Bird, firing a Javelin at a sedan, shooting a heli. Somewhere within that balance is the cloth from which breakouts like *Battlegrounds* are cut.



54 DOTA 2

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION 12

**Chris T:** There are a lot of games that are superficially like *Dota 2*, but there's only one game that actually is *Dota 2*. This is competitive Calvinball, macroeconomics with wizards, a game of high-stakes five-a-side with more rules than one person can ever know. What this complexity amounts to is a vibrant language shared by everybody who loves this mad game. Shame about all the angry internet men.



53 TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION New

**Fraser:** One of the rare spinoffs that's better than its progenitor. It gives us a broader look at the anarchy of Pandora and its demented inhabitants, but more importantly it's blessed with a trick that a lot of otherwise funny games don't have: Comedic timing.

**Phil:** By avoiding the more wacky elements, *Tales from the Borderlands* is both funny and heartfelt. I'd argue it's Telltale's best work.

52

## CRUSADER KINGS II

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION 31

**Chris L:** It's unusual for a grand strategy game to be so personal. Rather than playing as a faceless leader, you're an actual person with flaws and desires, and the people surrounding you are unique individuals with their own goals and needs. It makes for an engrossing blend of managing the big picture of world events, while dealing with the domestic soap opera of relationships and betrayals. There's more character building and storytelling in

*Crusader Kings II* than in most RPGs. Your character also has a realistic lifespan: Even if you survive assassination attempts, battles, illnesses, and other threats, you're still going to die of old age, at which point you resume the game as an heir. The impermanence of your characters and the passing of the torch from generation to generation gives your dynasty a real history, and your choices and actions real meaning.

51

## LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION 25

**Tom S:** *Left 4 Dead 2* has supplied me with the best co-op experiences of my life. It's a fascinating experiment in automatic pacing, but the AI director that controls the zombie army would be useless without the beautifully designed levels.

**Evan:** A guaranteed fun Friday night: Download a bunch of dumb character and gun mods and play *GoldenEye 4 Dead* with your friends,—its a surprisingly inspired,

zombie-filled recreation of the N64 classic shooter.

**Wes:** *Left 4 Dead 2* is still the perfect co-op experience on PC. Moments of mindless zombie blasting give you time to chat, horde rushes, and special infected send you yelping for help, and you can't help but laugh at the chaos around you. Showdowns demand real teamwork if you want to make it out alive. And the Community maps can keep you going forever.





# INVISIBLE, INC

RELEASE 2015 LAST POSITION  New

**Chris T:** Klei's inability to make a bad game allowed it to flit from *Mark of the Ninja* to this: *XCOM* with cyberpunk secret agents. *Invisible, Inc*'s genius lies in its transparency—you always understand what the outcome of your decisions will be, and are left with the gratifying challenge of unpicking each turn-based stealth challenge as you encounter it. It gives the sense of being both punishing and fair, something that *XCOM* has traditionally struggled with.

**Katharine:** Klei's developers are clever. The way this mixes *Don't Starve*'s survival themes with *Mark of the Ninja*'s acrobatics gives us the ultimate heist sim: a world where you're a cool badass until a single turn of fate triggers a desperate, but thrilling, scramble for life.

50



## 49 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION  38

**Evan:** CS:GO doesn't get enough credit for its asymmetry. In the most popular competitive FPS in the world, one team carries a gun that can kill with one shot (the AK-47), and the other doesn't.

**Andy K:** The tense rhythm of a match is thrilling, stressful and exhilarating. It's a game that demands careful tactical play, where every stupid mistake can mean defeat, which gives you no choice but to work at being a better player.



## 48 BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

RELEASED 2000 LAST POSITION  41

**Andy K:** The feeling of adventure when you emerge from Irenicus's grim dungeon to find the city of Athkatla sprawling out before you is hard to beat, and the sheer freedom you have to shape your character is exhilarating.

**Phil:** The first *Baldur's Gate* offered a slow journey to its titular city, but this gives up the goods immediately. It imbues *Baldur's Gate II* with a welcome sense of sprawling adventure.

47

## TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION  New

**James:** Both the most acrobatic modern FPS of the decade and the best big robot friend sim at once. *Call of Duty* meets *Quake* with mechs makes for a continually surprising campaign where every level is an experiment in something singular, whether it's first-person parkour, mech combat, or time travel. Time travel? Time travel. Accompanied by a multiplayer suite growing fatter with regular free updates, *Titanfall 2* is an easy recommendation.

**Samuel:** I enjoyed the campaign, but it's no *The New Order* or *Doom 2016*, so it's in the right place on this list.



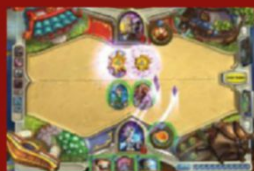
46

## HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ● New

**James:** It's time to put the dull term 'Metroidvania' to bed and start calling all 2D action exploration games 'Hollow-likes'. *Hollow Knight* deserves the new useless crown. As a blank-faced bug armed with only a nail, you delve underground and tour a fallen kingdom while piecing together its story and your true purpose. Huge chunks of the map, entire levels with unique enemies and music, are hidden behind breakable walls and locked doors. With something like 20 bosses,

a significant number of which are optional, it's possible to breeze by hours of exploration and combat without a clue. But chances are you'll find most of it, because *Hollow Knight* inspires curiosity. Environments are brimming with mystery, depicting fallen cities, abyssal nightmares and stinky dung piles. Animated in an adorable hand-drawn style and accompanied by a lovely soundtrack, *Hollow Knight* is an adventure that will play as well as it does today, forever.



## 45 HEARTHSTONE

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▲ 47

**Tim:** For all the memes about random cards generated by random cards and four-Mana 7/7s, the fact remains that *Hearthstone* is a helluva game. Whisper it, but right now *Hearthstone* is at its rudest health for a long time. A lot of that is down to the diversity ushered in by the brilliant *Journey to Un'Goro* expansion, but also the communication and leadership shown by Ben Brode, the game's avuncular director.



## 44 EVE ONLINE

RELEASED 2003 LAST POSITION ▼ 14

**Steven:** As a sandbox where players can either vie for power by wielding the might of thousand-person armies or spend an evening drunk, shooting rocks for minerals, *EVE Online* is unparalleled in scope. At 14 years old you might think the stories of betrayals and epic battles would all have been told by now, but *EVE* always finds a new way to shock me—both via the ingenuity of its players and their relentless cruelty.

43

## C&amp;C RED ALERT 2

RELEASED 2000 LAST POSITION ● New

**Phil:** The *Command & Conquer* series has never boasted the balance of, say, *StarCraft: Brood War*, but that's not the point. *Red Alert 2* is my favorite RTS because it combines a great campaign, varied units, and a silly sensibility, most evident during its amazing FMV cutscenes. **Samuel:** It's the peak of the series. I think—the unit types are daft but cool, and the campaign is probably the best one Westwood ever did. You can send Allied dolphins in to mess up Soviet squids. Which genius thought shutting Westwood was a good idea, again?





42

## VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE—BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION ▲ 65

**Andy C:** This is a perfect recreation of undead life in late-night L.A. It's smart, frightening, and layered with memorable characters, filtered through the unique perspectives of the seven playable clans. **Phil:** It's the sidequests I love. Can you kill a vampire hunter at a stripclub? Should you trick a reporter into returning to the den of a vampire? It's a delightful mix of ancient vampire politics and petty LA powerplays.



## 41 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION 35

**Chris L:** I've never experienced more tension and dread in a game than in *Stalker*. Each excursion into the Zone leaves me exhausted, jumpy, and shaken, and each return to one of Pripyat's few safe zones is accompanied by a exhalation of breath and a slow unknitting of my neck and shoulder muscles. Bleak, grim, and unrelenting, *Call of Pripyat* remains unmatched in atmosphere and horror.



## 40 FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 54

**Steven:** This does something I've never experienced before in an MMO: It makes me care about the characters. Weaving MMO grinding with a story that rivals *Final Fantasy*'s best, *XIV* is one of the most vibrant and engrossing MMOs I've played. What's better, the latest expansion, *Stormblood*, is the series' best achievement. It tells a captivating story of war and rebellion that no *Final Fantasy* fan should miss.

39

## KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION 11

**Chris T:** It marries the time-absorbing pull of construction with the challenge of a good puzzle while simulating just enough of real rocketry to make you feel like you're learning something. Getting a rocket and its crew safely into orbit is a substantial challenge, something you'll feel rightly proud of when you crack it—and the game only broadens from there, with each new goal stretching out organically ahead of



you. If that doesn't appeal to you, *KSP* is flexible: If you want to focus on building a giant rocket-powered robot, go for it.

**Tyler:** I shot a Kerbal into orbit and accidentally left him there. I'm afraid to reopen the game because he's still floating there in orbit, and I feel like as long as *KSP* isn't running he's at least in stasis. I'd like to apologize to all of Kerbalkind for what I've done. Anyway, 10/10 for sure. Brilliant game.

38

## HEROES OF THE STORM

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New

**Steven:** By stripping away so much of the complexity of MOBAs, *Heroes of the Storm* manages to be both accessible and still incredibly strategic. Similar to what *Hearthstone* did for *Magic: The Gathering*, *Heroes of the Storm* distills the drama of a MOBA into something that anyone can enjoy. It also has some of the zaniest hero designs I've ever seen. Two players each playing a separate head of a single ogre? Fantastic. If *Heroes of the*

*Storm* has always been looked down upon as 'baby's first MOBA' then to hell with it, being a kid is way more fun anyway. **Hannah:** I'm confident in saying it's the most well-designed game of its genre. Perhaps the most impressive feature is its diverse strategy—with each map being unique, every niche strategy is catered to in some way, no character or playstyle ends up dying at the feet of a metagame.

### PERSONAL PICK

Leif Johnson



### THE LONG DARK

The survival genre in its purest form. No zombies or rideable dinosaurs cross your path here; instead, it's just you, your calories, and some scattered junk against the cruel menace of the deep Canadian winter. Quiet, beautiful, and contemplative, it reminds us there's poetry in despair.

### PERSONAL PICK

James Davenport



### LITTLE NIGHTMARES

I've never been so deeply unnerved while running from left to right. A simple sidescroller with a disgusting aesthetic, filled with gruesome creatures that look like they're moulded from pig grease. It's short, but its images hit close to home and linger long after the credits roll.

## PERSONAL PICK

Andy  
Chalk



## LEGEND OF GRIMROCK II

It expands on its predecessor in every way, with multiple multilevel dungeons, outdoor environments, new monsters and secrets galore. The genre is too niche to ever allow for major mainstream success, but for fans of that old-school style (like me!), this is as good as it gets.

## PERSONAL PICK

Steven  
Messner



## NIGHT IN THE WOODS

Adventure games tend to bore me, but when they capture the emotions of being a cocksure teen trying to find their place in an adult world, it's hard not to be engrossed. *Night in the Woods* is part-ghost story and part-coming of age story and it's touching, evocative, and hilarious.



37

## 80 DAYS

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▲ 76

**Andy K:** A colorful alternate history elevated by exquisite writing, endlessly replayable thanks to the many routes you can take across the globe and the choices you can make in its unpredictable story. Moving, funny, intelligent, and surprisingly challenging, *80 Days* is, and I don't say this lightly, a masterpiece of interactive fiction.

**Samuel:** Fantastic writing and scene-setting art bring this to life.

**Katharine:** Phileas Fogg may be a bossy ass, but balancing the ticking clock of his wager against soaking up every last diversion is tremendous fun.



## 36 ZERO ESCAPE: THE NONARY GAMES

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ● New

**Katharine:** Bundling together two of the best visual novels around, *The Nonary Games* drums up tension from the simple act of left-clicking text boxes. Both stories lock you in deadly games of trust, with story paths that shine new light on one another and allow for audacious twists. Add some fiendish 'escape room' puzzles to break up the (excellent) reams of text, and this feels like serious nourishment for the brain.



## 35 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

**Matthew:** Everything you need to know is in the name, and Creative Assembly delivers brilliantly on the promise of vivid battles in the Warhammer world. If you've ever consumed army books or drybrushed a Beastman, there's a joy in seeing it come to life in a game that rewrites the lore every time you play. Every race plays like a different game, but I'll always be happy spending days rebuilding the Dwarf empire.

34

## THUMPER

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

**James:** Five minutes into the scarab's journey down *Thumper's* hell road, my hands lose color and a pool of sweat drips down into my lap. Tapping buttons and turning sharp corners to a beat with a bizarre time signature while lights strobe and impossible geometry blurs by isn't easy. *Thumper* is, after all, a punishing rhythm game designed to make you feel uncomfortable. Through punishment and a drip feed of new rules, *Thumper*

teaches as it tortures. Most will never master it, but that's the point. The joy comes from stemming a hellish tide, from survival and syncopation with a daunting, dangerous force.

**Phil:** What if *Audiosurf* didn't like you? That's *Thumper*, a game that weaponizes time signatures to create intense rhythm action.

**Evan:** *Thumper* is actually a documentary about the path you take to heaven or hell when you die.

33

## DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN ENHANCED EDITION

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● 23

**Tom M:** Playing an 80-plus-hour RPG entirely co-op was a strangely intimate experience. A flurry of quick saves for the first 20 hours gave way to a rhythm of wordless and efficient combat. But as the game reached those last 20 hours, *Divinity: Original Sin* ramped the difficulty back up and the dialogue restarted—we moved methodically through each fight, formed fine-tuned

strategies to safely take on Death Knights, and at one point even built an obstacle course out of chairs and boxes to slow down a hasted demon. *Divinity: Original Sin* rewards you for creative thinking, and isn't afraid to beat you down until you understand that. And working through those challenges with the right partner is an RPG experience I haven't found anywhere else.





# BAYONETTA

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION  New

**Samuel:** I'm so glad this glorious hack-and-slash game finally came to PC, and it's the best version. Unlocking the extra weapons and perfecting the combat system means you can play *Bayonetta* for about 100 hours if you want to.

**Katharine:** PlatinumGames is a studio that cut its teeth at the arcade and made its living on console, but on a technical level PC feels like a more natural home for its action delights. Chief among them is *Bayonetta*, a take-no-prisoners workout for the fingers that has you slipping through cracks in attacks to slow time and unleash combos built from your own hair. Which other hero delivers damage by the megaton, can materialize a guillotine for a finisher, or simply give an angel a good spanking? This. Is. Videogames.

**Chris T:** It's a treat to have *Bayonetta* on PC at long last. This exuberant, outlandishly camp brawler from the

creators of *Devil May Cry* is imaginative and deeply, deeply silly. It's gaming's own hyperviolent Rocky Horror Picture Show starring a fourth-wall-disregarding, leather-clad nun-witch with guns strapped to her stilettos who kills angels by turning her hair, which is also her clothes, into dragons and bondage devices. Games are rarely this free, fun, or surprising.

**Phil:** It's fun and campy, but don't let that fool you: *Bayonetta* boasts the best combat around. The rhythm feels great, as you chain kicks and punches before topping it all off with a hair-based finisher that acts as the exclamation mark to a

combo. But *Bayonetta* goes deeper still, with slow-mo evades and dodge offsets. You can get by with the basics, but take the time to master its high-level combat systems and *Bayonetta* feels unlike anything else.



# 32

## 31 THIEF GOLD

RELEASED 1998 LAST POSITION  New

**Jody:** 'The first *Thief* game is the best' is a hill I'll die on. *Thief* has as much level variety as three other games, from wealthy mansions to tombs with zombies and deathtraps to straight-up horror. Where it's arguably weak is the AI, but even that becomes a strength when guards go haywire and the story acknowledges it with running jokes about their drunkenness—notes of comedy to alleviate the tension.



## 30 DIABLO III

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION  32

**Tom S:** Help, I can't stop playing this game. Every time I charge through a level in adventure mode with a new character, I like it even more. I just love blowing up hundreds of monsters with satisfying abilities. After years of updates, *Diablo III* is a beautifully fast and generous game that showers you with experience, legendary weapons and new ways to kill monsters. The best action RPG ever, for my money.



## 29 FORZA HORIZON 3

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION  New

**Phil:** A pitch-perfect sandbox that combines lighthearted race events with a fetishistic appreciation of cars. *Horizon 3* is big, bombastic and beautiful—set in one of the most vibrant environments I've ever explored. The events are fun, but the real masterstroke is found in the skill system, which creates a thrilling tug-of-war between risk and reward. It makes time spent in its world a joy.

28 **FALLOUT:  
NEW VEGAS**

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ▲ 87

**Joe:** Contrary to popular opinion: The Mojave wasteland is the most interesting settings of all the *Fallout* games. Learning each survivor's tale and how to play them against one another makes for some interesting morally gray decision making.

**Samuel:** I really like *New Vegas*'s reactivity to your decisions in the story, but it's the worst of the 3D *Fallout* games for exploration, for me.

27 **WHAT REMAINS  
OF EDITH FINCH**

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ● New

**Andy K:** Exploring the Finch residence and uncovering the lives of its residents is one of the most emotionally stirring experiences I've had in a videogame.

**Evan:** I was not expecting tentacles.

**James:** It has one bizarre scene after another, made devastating by a bittersweet story about family and loss.

**Phil:** This is what you'd get if *WarioWare* was a cohesive tale about life, death, and family.

26 **THE ELDER SCROLLS V:  
SKYRIM**

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION 10

**Chris L:** What it lacks in polish and looks it makes up for tenfold in the freedom it provides. *Skyrim* has a story, but more importantly it's a place for players to create their own story, to build characters from the ground up, and play the way they want. It's also flexible, which has enabled modders to create hundreds of extra hours of content, meaning we'll be playing *Skyrim* long after its sequel arrives.

25 **PLAYERUNKNOWN'S  
BATTLEGROUNDS**

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ● New

**Evan:** One: It compresses the time and space that survival games like *DayZ* give you, forcing you into contact with other players and out of your comfort zone. And two: It oscillates between serious and silly—you're shouting compass bearings, then you're backflipping a motorbike over your friends.

**Andy K:** And for the solo player, *Battlegrounds* is just as thrilling. Playing it as a stealth game, with humans instead of AI guards, and ducking between cover is wonderfully tense.

**Steven:** Solo is awesome, but co-op is where it really takes off. Having a buddy you can rely on really expands your strategic options. There's rarely a decision made during a duo match that doesn't feel meaningful.

**Chris T:** The magic of *Battlegrounds* is the way it makes every encounter feel meaningful. When only one can win and death comes quickly, every choice you make matters: Getting the drop on an foe and stealing their stuff is great, but there's catharsis to getting caught, too.







24

## NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION ◆ New

**Leif:** You could be forgiven for dismissing *Nier: Automata* as a generic Japanese RPG—in some ways it embraces those expectations to subvert them. But this is a science fiction masterwork; a tale with a meaning that grows more bizarre with each playthrough, as we see events through the eyes of different characters. It's also a blast, swapping between third-person action, shoot-'em-up, and platformer genres effortlessly.

**Phil:** I prefer *Bayonetta's* combat, but the world of *Nier* is beautiful. It also offers what is sure to be 2017's best soundtrack.

### PERSONAL PICK

Tom Marks



### WARFRAME

You can play *Warframe* for 100 hours and only scratch its surface. It's a game that's perfected grind, making the simple act of moving through its procedural levels and smashing into enemies a high-flying joy. Few games feel as empowering, and next to none are updated as often.



23 DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000 LAST POSITION 13

**Andy K:** The visuals have aged horribly, to the point where it's almost offensive to modern eyes, but get over that hump and *Deus Ex* is still one of the best, richest, most expansive immersive sims on PC. Vast levels filled with NPCs, alternate paths, and optional missions, a twisting, conspiracy-laden plot and a bleak, dystopian atmosphere make it an essential PC game, despite being almost 20 years old.



22 STARDREW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ▲ 97

**Phil:** A farming RPG created by one person. It's a heartwarming success story and a legitimately great version of a genre that was underrepresented on PC. The valley is packed with activities, from fishing to dungeon crawling, in addition to the day-to-day task of growing crops, milking cows, baking and refining your raw produce into more desirable materials. Gentrification has never been so entertaining.

21

## FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▲ 78

**Samuel:** At the last NYE party I went to, we played *FTL* as a group, and I found myself shouting tips for how to deal with slaver ships, mysterious signals, and that crazy guy on the planet's surface, who can either join your crew or do damage to your ship. I'd recommend it to sci-fi fans and strategy devotees equally—but it's also a great introduction to strategy generally.

**Matthew:** Failure, panic, and the quiet acceptance

of death: These are the hallmarks of *FTL*, a space exploration game with roguelike elements which is far more fun than I've made it sound. It's like experiencing your most beloved sci-fi reveries with a dose of relentless realism. Things will burn. People will suffocate. You probably *won't* survive that heroic rescue. But when you do, it honestly feels amazing. Just don't rename your crewmates after your friends.

### PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



20

## BATTLEFIELD 1

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ◆ New

**Evan:** Who expected *Battlefield* to find its stride in WWI? The technological constraints of the nineteenth century inspired the series' most interesting infantry gunplay. The Madsen MG is powerful, but its vertical magazine blocks your vision. The absence of plentiful armored transport makes the 70-ton Char 2C supertank feel like a baby Godzilla when it hits the map. Gorgeous art and sound design don't hurt.

**Andy K:** The shift from high-precision modern weapons provided the shot in the arm *Battlefield* needed. It's a delight to return to the mud and rust of an older war. And enough licence is taken with the history to ensure it doesn't feel like a cartoon depiction of WWI. The St Quentin Scar map is a highlight: a stretch of farmland dotted with interesting architecture to capture. Every minute feels chaotic and urgent.

### LIFE IS STRANGE

A beautiful time travel adventure that builds upon and surpasses Telltale's template. Whatever you might think about the hella dated dialogue, Dontnod should be commended for crafting a memorable tale that makes you care about what happens to its two main characters.

## PERSONAL PICK

Chris  
Thursten



## PREY

This love letter to the likes of *System Shock* deserves praise for the way it lets you chart your own course through a believably simulated space station. Not all of its ideas come off—the Nightmare creature is a bit of a dud—but *Prey* is a victory for player-respecting design nonetheless.

## PERSONAL PICK

Tyler  
Wilde



## DEFCON

A simple game of mutually-assured destruction. Build your airfields, silos, and naval fleets, and then pointlessly defend your state by exchanging nukes with the world—kill more than the enemy, lose fewer than the enemy. It's more challenging than it sounds, even though no one actually wins.



19

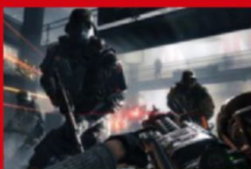
## HER STORY

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▲ 39

**Samuel:** I recently found myself recommending PC games to someone who normally plays on consoles. The first thing I did was bring up *Her Story*.

**Tim:** At some point we're going to look back on this as the herald of non-shit FMV games, but few of the flood that have followed so far have borne any comparison to *Her Story*. And that's because Sam Barlow's elegant concept, strong writing, and standout performance by Viva Seifert all feel like bottled lightning levels of brilliant. A rare treat.

**Hannah:** *Her Story* is the bar for detective games. With the uniqueness of searching through a poorly-sorted database to piece together a mystery, you put together the threads of its story yourself. The FMV nature only adds to how unsettling it can become.



## 18 WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ● New

**Tom S:** It's a simple formula: Put some Nazis in a level, give a player some massive guns, and you've got a decent FPS. *The New Order* goes above and beyond regular shooters with great characters and a sense of humor, and stealth that works. It's an intelligent update of a classic series that reflects on the inherent silliness of its setup, even as it invites you to indulge, ideally with a machine gun in each hand.



## 17 BIOSHOCK

RELEASED 2007 LAST POSITION ■ No change

**Samuel:** Still fantastic, and it's aged beautifully. Before audiotapes were overdone as a narrative device, this perfected them—a brilliantly written and acted way to discover the story of this fallen city.

**Andy K:** I still get goosebumps when screen drops to reveal the majesty of Rapture, and it only gets better as you delve deeper into Andrew Ryan's fucked up metropolis.

16

## ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION 8

**Steven:** Other multiplayer games, like shooters, rarely stop to let both you and your opponents soak in a critical moment of the match, but *Rocket League* forces you to relive every one. After each goal, you sit down and watch that amazing pass and aerial shot, basking in the glory of it. Or maybe you sit in shame and stew the horror of choking and missing the game-winning save. Either way, the spectrum of emotions of a match in

*Rocket League*, like any real sport, is engrossing.

**Samuel:** I didn't vote for *Rocket League* this year, that's why it's dropped a bit down the list. I had to stop playing it for my sanity, after seeing rocket cars in my dreams.

**Joe:** I love football and hate racing but, despite there being cars, balls, and goals here, Psyonix's ball-cage-car-'em-up is a different beast. It's bloody good too and, as Samuel suggests, is pretty moreish.

15

## RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▲ 27

**Shaun:** This tense tactical shooter has delivered some of the most stressful and memorable moments I've ever had in games. The destructible maps, coupled with the unique abilities of each operator, makes every match feel minty fresh. Many hands were wrung when Ubisoft announced this would be multiplayer only, but it has since become the most enduring PVP game in my library, and Ubisoft is giving it the care it deserves.

**Evan:** Honestly, Shaun, I think it's a miracle that *Siege*'s devs were able to convince one of the biggest game makers in the world to make a multiplayer-only FPS in 2015. It's Ubisoft's *Counter-Strike*.

**Steven:** I love the way it teaches through example. You get shot and die, but can't understand how until you watch the replay and realize it was through a tiny murder-hole punched into a destructible wall. It then becomes your go-to tactic.





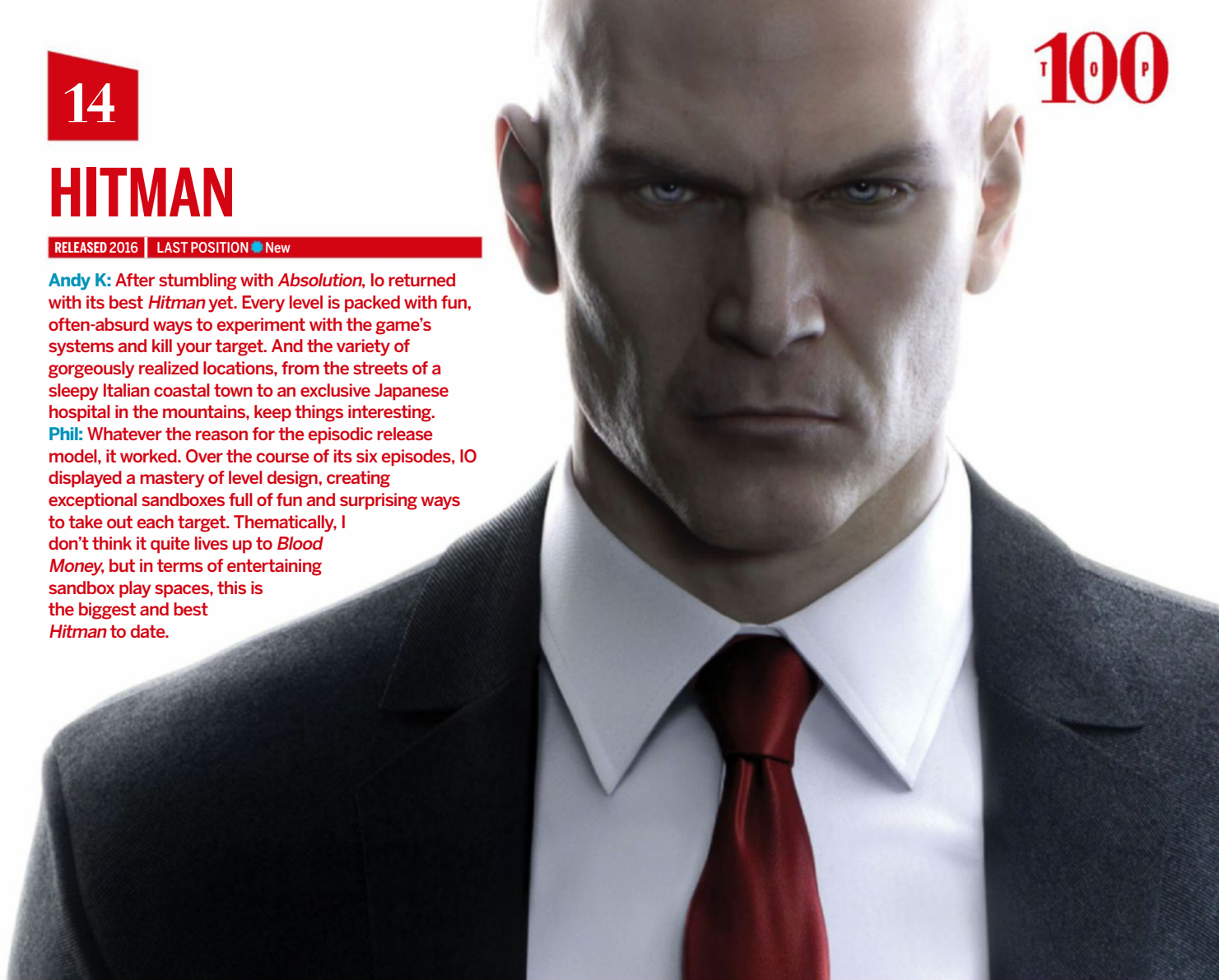
14

## HITMAN

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION  New

**Andy K:** After stumbling with *Absolution*, IO returned with its best *Hitman* yet. Every level is packed with fun, often-absurd ways to experiment with the game's systems and kill your target. And the variety of gorgeously realized locations, from the streets of a sleepy Italian coastal town to an exclusive Japanese hospital in the mountains, keep things interesting.

**Phil:** Whatever the reason for the episodic release model, it worked. Over the course of its six episodes, IO displayed a mastery of level design, creating exceptional sandboxes full of fun and surprising ways to take out each target. Thematically, I don't think it quite lives up to *Blood Money*, but in terms of entertaining sandbox play spaces, this is the biggest and best *Hitman* to date.



## 13 OVERWATCH

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION  24

**Phil:** While Samuel will tell you that *Overwatch* is silly because it has a hyperintelligent gorilla, I will tell you that it's good because his abilities, a) make sense for a hyperintelligent gorilla, and b) allow you to fill a necessary role. Hero shooters are insanely popular today, and *Overwatch* is the best of them. Its characters are fun, clever and cute as all hell, and its design supports a variety of playstyles.



## 12 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION  9

**Andy K:** One of the finest playgrounds on PC. Production values don't get higher, and the story is 30 hours of colorful fun, with few dips in quality. I've finished it three times now, and I rarely replay games all the way through.

**Samuel:** I wish I had the time to give *GTA Online*, but *GTA V* is still all about enjoying that world. It's all I ever wanted: *GTA IV*'s detail with *San Andreas*'s scale.

11

## HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION  3

**Chris L:** We waited for years for a game that could top 1998's seminal FPS *Half-Life*, and it's fitting that Valve would be the only ones who could deliver. *Half-Life 2* shared the original's creative level design and memorable scripted sequences that left us feeling like we were finding our own way through the world, despite it being a linear shooter. Gordon Freeman remains a beloved and enduring figure, despite never uttering a word or appearing as more than a pair of gloved hands, and his gravity gun is still the best tool/toy/weapon ever to grace a game.

# SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 15

**Shaun:** This is the roguelike other roguelikes aspire to topple. But they rarely achieve the intricacy of *Spelunky*, because even though most players know its secrets, it's still important to see them for yourself. I've never finished a hell run, but I'm still trying to do one.

**Phil:** My favorite moments are when I hear a distant explosion. It usually means I'll be dead soon, but also that I get to reverse engineer the comedy of errors that is a *Spelunky* chain reaction.

10



9

## DOOM

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

**Samuel:** Between this and *Wolfenstein*, Bethesda has brought us the best shooters in years. *Doom* has the edge for me because its guns, and their overpowering mods, are terrific fun. The knockback/melee counter element gives it a unique rhythm, which is a hard thing to find in a genre as overcrowded as the FPS.

**Phil:** Between the chunky gunfeel, the multistorey arenas and the one-two punch of gun blast and melee finisher, *Doom*'s combat feels unlike anything else. I love its pace, and the contrast between the frenetic gunplay, and the methodical exploration of its arenas.

**Evan:** The soundtrack is a miracle sent from hell. Mick Gordon managed to show complete reverence for Bobby Prince's MIDI tracks while adding his own style of throbbing, swirling metal.

8

## ALIEN: ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▲ 16

**Samuel:** The best horror game ever. I would even argue its best moment involves no alien at all, as an eerie showroom filled with androids comes to life. A masterpiece.

**Tom S:** *Isolation*'s commitment to the source material is inspiring and horribly convincing. It is also a fascinating AI experiment. For years I've wanted more interesting, dynamic enemies, and few are better than *Isolation*'s Xenomorph.



7

## MASS EFFECT 2

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ● 4

**Samuel:** This is still the king of BioWare's sci-fi RPG series. The best companions, the most exciting scenario, and a real sense of being a cool bunch of outsiders in this galaxy.

**Andy K:** I've never cared about a cast as much as the ragtag crew of the Normandy SR-2. As much as I enjoyed exploring an exciting, vividly realized galaxy, I just looked forward to returning to my ship and checking in with all my weird space pals.

**Phil:** Truly there has never been a better game about sexing up a badass lizard assassin. *Mass Effect 2* cut a lot of its predecessor's chaff. What remained was a competent shooter that underpinned a memorably characterful sci-fi adventure.





# METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ■ No change

**Samuel:** *MGSV* is pretty much a perfect systems-driven stealth-action game. Its upgrade tree offers new ways to improve your tactics well after the game is finished. It took me about 90 hours to get the Fulton upgrade that can yank objects through a wormhole. Worth it.

**Tom S:** You have to forgive it for the batty plotting and terrible boss enemies, because the rest of the game is so huge and rich with possibility. That's thanks to its mad gadgets, like the one Sam described, but I love the companions too. Do you go with the knife-wielding dog, the photosynthetic sniper, or the miniature mech suit? These are the choices I want to be making in games.

**Andy K:** This has ruined stealth games for me. The sheer variety of entertaining ways to tackle a mission in *MGSV* makes almost everything else feel disappointingly shallow and unambitious in comparison. And the more daft gadgets and weapons you unlock, the more fun it gets, whether it's a rocket fist or a wormhole generator. As a longtime *MGS* fan, the story is disappointing, but the richness of the sandbox make up for it.

**Phil:** I told a horse to poop in the road, and my target drove over it and crashed. *Metal Gear Solid V* is the best game.



6

5

## PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION ▲ 28

**Andy K:** A game so good you wonder how Valve pulled it off. Everything in *Portal 2* is pitch perfect, from the design of the puzzles, to the voice acting, to the journey through the various periods of Aperture Science's history. Stephen Merchant is superb as twitchy robot Wheatley, but it's JK Simmons as Aperture founder Cave Johnson who gets the biggest laughs. However, as funny as it is, there's also a dark streak, particularly the sinister backstory of how GLaDOS came to be. *Portal 2* excels as a puzzle game, a comedy, and a piece of evocative science fiction, and represents Valve at the absolute peak of its craft.

**Tom S:** Funny games are so novel now, and *Portal 2*'s sense of humor has not grown old. I enjoyed the magic paint puzzles and flying through

the air in *Portal 2*'s large testing chambers, but the puzzles never felt as new and exciting as the original. Those moments instead appeared in *Portal 2*'s superb co-op mode. GLaDOS' taunts you and your partner, and plays you off against each other in a hilarious struggle of power and wit.

**Phil:** The main story isn't as pure a puzzle game as the original *Portal*, but it makes up for it with its comedy craft. I can't say for sure, but I'm convinced that the achievement notification for 'The Part Where He Kills You' was fine-tuned to pop at the funniest possible moment. But even away from Valve's mastery, *Portal 2* is significant for its community contributions, and the thousands of new puzzles and campaigns available through the Steam Workshop.





## XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ▲19

**Tom S:** Turn-based strategy games are rarely capable of generating the drama of an *XCOM 2* campaign. In fact, few games of any genre are. When you're securing funds and personnel it feels like a survival game. When you're ambushing aliens and clearing buildings, it feels like a power trip. Excellent soldier customization and upgrade trees mesh nicely with the slightly cartoon presentation, but it's the war stories that stand out—that time an alien murdered your star sniper, or a ranger chopped their way to the extraction zone. *XCOM 2*'s soldiers matter. The lows can be harrowing, but the highs are sensational.

**Joe:** I've sunk more hours into *XCOM 2* than I care to admit, but let me tell you a secret: I'm not that good at it. Which speaks volumes for the game itself, as one which whoops my backside yet has me coming back for more.

4



3

## DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

**Andy K:** I didn't think Arkane could top the first game, but here we are. *Dishonored 2* is one of the most beautifully designed stealth games on PC, with systems that allow for a huge amount of creative expression. Countless ways to combine your powers punctuate every moment of play with a feeling that you're in control, making your own mark on the world, rather than playing how the developer wants you to. And Karnaca is a stunning setting, with an organic, hand-crafted feel that few games manage.

**Joe:** Mixing and matching melee skills, conventional weapons and supernatural abilities when offing enemies is where *Dishonored 2* shines. Harder working players than me will tell you it's best played in stealth mode, where you slide your

way around its wonderful settings, but I prefer bloodshed. And little excites me more than having Emily match multiple foes with a four-link Domino blast, before taking her enemy troupe down simultaneously with one incendiary crossbolt bolt to the head. Nice.

**Phil:** As a sandbox of emergent systems, *Dishonored 2* is without equal. That applies not just to the action, but also to how the world reacts in response to your choices within the story. Take, for instance, A Crack In The Slab. It's a fantastic level with a clever time-skip gimmick, and it features a potential outcome that beautifully rewards your curiosity and initiative. *Dishonored 2* is a frequent showcase of Arkane's talent for anticipating a player's actions.





2

# DARK SOULS

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ■ No Change

**Joe:** What can be said about FromSoftware's infamous action roleplayer that hasn't already been discussed? Probably nothing, which means you can add me to its horde of sun-praising worshipers. I've lost count of the number of times I've returned to Lordran, and have steadily upped my trip tally to *Dark Souls II*'s Drangleic, and the series' third entry's Lothric since it landed last year. It's been five years since the first *Dark Souls* debuted on PC, and you can bet your humanity it'll be on this list five years from now.

**James:** *Dark Souls* is easier to recommend on PC than ever thanks to the tireless efforts of modders. With *DSfix* you can play it at just about any resolution. *Dark Souls Mouse Fix* makes mouse-and-keyboard play a legitimate control method. Item location

randomizers make it infinitely replayable. And mods such as the *Shovel Knight* armor or fidget spinner weapon skin show the it's got a near infinite extended life. *Dark Souls'* reputation began as a difficult, punishing game. On the PC, it's evolved to whatever you want it to be.

**Tom S:** In terms of combat, weapons, enemies, *Dark Souls III* is more consistent. Yet I would still recommend the original *Dark Souls*, because the

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IT'S EVOLVED TO  
BECOME  
WHATEVER YOU  
WANT IT TO BE

---

stories you tease out of the stonework and item descriptions are more powerful. A lot of games tell you that you're a hero in a cursed world, but with every death and rebirth, *Dark Souls* does a fantastic job in making you feel it.

For all its brilliance, *Dark Souls* is a thoroughly inaccessible game that is actively hostile to new players. For a long time I read the praise for *Dark Souls* with a degree of cynicism, assuming that membership of the exclusive *Dark Souls* lovers club was the main appeal. Now I am one of them. It's a gruelling and memorable combat roleplaying game that has kept its singular identity, even as more and more games start to copy the formula. I could go on, but perhaps the best praise I could give is to say that, all these years after release, *Dark Souls* is still worth wanking on about.









# THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ■ No change

**Andy K:** No game makes me feel like I'm on an adventure as much as *The Witcher 3*. It's when I'm riding my horse through the wilderness with no specific goal in mind, seeing what quests I stumble into, that I love it the most. Geralt as a wandering samurai, rather than someone trying to save the world. And it helps that almost every quest you find has something interesting about it. I wouldn't go so far as to say every sidequest is meaningful, but it comes close. There's always some nice little twist in the story, or a weird new monster to fight, and the writing is excellent. I'll never forget the first time I landed on Skellige and rode through those snowy mountains. It's a breathtaking place, with its own rich history, culture, and politics, which you can choose to get involved in. Or you can get on your horse and see where the freezing winds take you.

**Phil:** In some ways, *The Witcher 3* is similar to those Ubisoft-style open worlds in which you clear a map of its hundreds and hundreds of icons. But while many open world games trade on emergent systems that support rote (albeit entertaining) interactions, *The Witcher 3*'s best icons lead to stories of interesting characters trying to make their way in a dark, gruelling world. Every main quest, every sidestory, every monster contract, every treasure hunt—they all build up the richness and texture of this vast, fascinating world. It helps that you view all of this through the lens of Geralt, one of the most likeable protagonists around. He knows his place in this world, and guides you through it with a gruff, weary affability. Elsewhere on this list you'll find games with better combat, or

more intricate RPG systems, or even a more consistently gripping story. But there's a reason *The Witcher 3* has been named our best game for two years running. It works to create an unforgettable, unforgiving atmosphere, and casts you as a singularly capable problem solver—not good, not evil, just the right man for the job.

**Tom S:** When I started playing *Baldur's Gate* and other RPGs, I dreamed of the game that would let me live in the fantasy books I loved. *The Witcher 3* comes closer than any other to delivering the scale and

## THERE'S ALWAYS SOME NICE LITTLE TWIST IN THE STORY

spectacle of a quality dark fantasy novel. It's gritty and dark in places, like the swamp of Crookback Bog, but wide and open in others. It was a rush to take a little boat away from the mainland and see the mountains of Skellige grow on the horizon. Every island has a story—a rogue giant here, a tormented werewolf there. It's derivative in many ways, but in this case production values really matter, and *The Witcher 3* is way ahead. Great characters, great stories and cool monsters.

**Steven:** One of the best aspects of *The Witcher 3* has always been landscape. Velen, for example, is little more than

rolling grasslands, forests, and swamps, and lesser RPGs would combine those biomes to make something functional but forgettable. But *The Witcher 3* has an incredible grasp on how to design environments—the way a road winds through a copse of trees swaying in an evening breeze that you can almost feel. Books are brilliant because their worlds leap to life in our minds as we read them, but I don't think I could ever imagine a world as vivid as the Northern Kingdoms.

**Shaun:** As a games enthusiast who mashes the skip button on cutscenes, *The Witcher 3* is one of only a few games in which I play for the story. Even on a second and third playthrough, I've got an eye out for tiny nuances in the world's characters that I might have missed. *The Witcher 3* is remarkable for this reason, at least as far as I'm concerned: It's able to transfix both a fantasy and videogame story naysayer. And I can't even watch an episode of *Game of Thrones* without idly scrolling through the PC Gamer Discord channel.

**Andy K:** We haven't even mentioned the expansions! I think I love *Blood and Wine* even more than the main game. Placing the grizzled, weary Witcher into a colorful fairytale land is a great concept, and seeing evil creep into this idyllic setting makes for a fascinating contrast. It's 20 hours of fantastic quests, more great writing, and a stunning setting. Toussaint is all golden fields, villages, and vineyards, with a gleaming white castle at the center of it all, and it feels completely different to anywhere in the Northern Kingdoms. And while not as dramatic a change in tone, the other expansion, *Hearts of Stone*, is a superb chunk of new story with a strong villain and some memorable quests. So with the main game plus the expansions, you're looking at hundreds of hours of the finest roleplaying on PC. CD Projekt Red has set a new benchmark for RPG design that other developers will have to work extremely hard to beat.



# John Clark

**SEGA EUROPE's** senior VP of commercial publishing talks console ports. *By Samuel Roberts*

**I**n recent years, alongside big strategy games, such as *Total War: Warhammer* and *Company of Heroes 2*, Sega has brought some of its more eclectic console classics to PC, like *Bayonetta*, *Valkyria Chronicles*, and *Vanquish*. Sega's got much more to come, though. Sega Europe's John Clark explains the process behind porting these games, and I press him on what else we can expect to see on PC in future.

## What motivates your choice of which old console games to bring to PC?

If I asked you to write me a list of the ten games you want Sega to bring out on PC, it probably isn't any different from the list [we have]. What motivates that [is] that people just have an affinity with [our] games, and there's no surprise in the games that would be on that list.

We recently launched *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*, and prior to that we launched *Valkyria Chronicles*. Further back, we launched *Typing of the Dead*—and all of these games that are either delivering the experiences that the community wants, or they're enabling us to understand how the community plays those games, and how the community interacts. I think when we launched *Bayonetta*, straight away on Steam I saw somebody say, 'We want to see these games on Steam now! Sega, we want to see you working on these!' And we're looking at that and we say, 'Yeah, we know! We know!'—and we want to work on them as well, and we haven't finished. We just haven't finished with *Vanquish* and *Bayonetta*, we're still there—we are actively working on other games as we speak. We're not ready to tell you what they are, but there will be news coming out in the next few months.

## What are the challenges of porting a game to PC? *Vanquish* never ran at 60 frames per second, for example—what's the process behind that?

First, [depending on how old the game is], what's the archiving of the source code like? Does the engine and the way that the game was built enable us to elegantly port it onto PC? As you say, they weren't built for variable framerates or 60 frames per second, so we worked with PlatinumGames on that. But we also bring in our own expertise from some studios that we work within the UK, and some talent that we know understands how we want to align PC games to the audience.

So there's the technical aspect, there's the source code, the status of the source code. There is everything from licensing and past agreements, but it could be anything from music or what items are in the game. Are we drinking a particular type of beverage, are we eating a particular type of food, or driving a particular car? That's all relevant through a lot of Sega games, and we do need to check all of those, and it does have an influence on what is the next one on the list that we can get to.

## Are there any projects where it's just too tangled up licensing-wise or logistically to do? Is that just a challenge you face with some of the older games?

Absolutely. And [it's] a challenge that we accept and we dive into and, for us, it's [about] figuring out a way through it, and we've got a really progressive attitude in that we want to see certain games come to market. We are committed to get those games to market that fall into that exact category that you've just said.

## One thing that you haven't done yet is bring any Atlus games to PC—I was wondering whether that is something we could possibly look at in the future?

The great thing about being involved with Atlus—and you see it through Sega America and Atlus—they're bringing out *Persona 5*, which is an Atlus title, but they're bringing out new editions of the *Yakuza* titles, and so it just makes sense that we all talk together about extending all of those, incredible IP, across to Steam and recognize the fact that the PC audience adds to those community and consumer experiences. It doesn't detract from it, and it isn't anything that they need to be concerned about, so those conversations definitely happen.

We see our role as educating our business about PC and Steam, as well as driving our business forward in retail and on console as well, and we're all aware of the opportunities that are across all platforms for the IP.

## Everyone has that wish list of games they want to see on PC. You seem to be really conscious of that.

Yeah, if you send that list to us and I'll tell you which ones we can tick, which ones are on our list, which ones are possibilities, which ones are not possibilities, which ones we've talked about, which ones we're talking about, which ones we're working on—they'll be on that list.

## *Yakuza*, is that a possibility on PC?

It's on that list. It's something that we're talking about. We can see that *Yakuza* is out on console, and it would just be incredible to bring that to the PC audience.

## I guess, along the same lines—*Persona*?

Of course, of course—I keep staying ahead of you, I'm trying to guess what you're going to say next.

## Sorry, I know you can't confirm any of this.

No, absolutely. But we don't feel that anything is off the table in terms of these conversations. The fact that, as an organization, we're having these [conversations], they're healthy conversations, they're constructive, we recognize the value of the community, we recognize the value of the IP. The IP has got continued life to grow bigger, and, yeah, we're having those conversations. ■





**“IT WOULD JUST  
BE INCREDIBLE  
TO BRING  
[YAKUZA] TO  
THE PC  
AUDIENCE”**



**RIGHT:** *Vanquish* and *Bayonetta* are right at home on PC.



# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions.

### ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

### DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little to no reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.

**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

**Examples** *Life is Strange, Planet Coaster*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

**Examples** *Vanquish, Mass Effect: Andromeda*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

**Examples** *Forza Horizon 3, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



## Calm before the storm

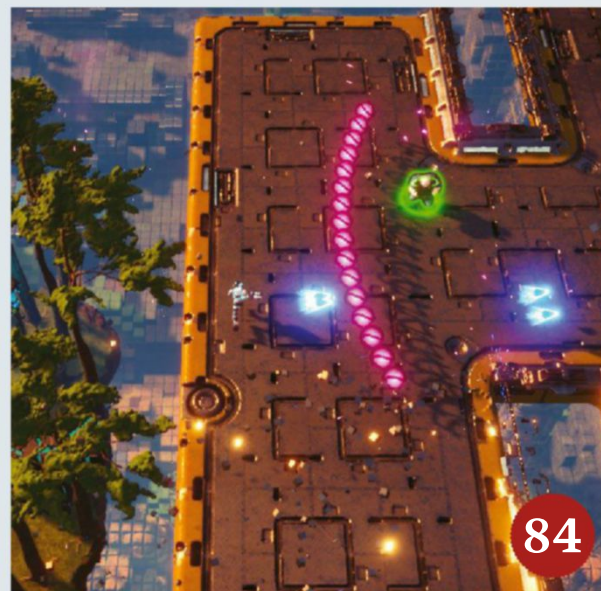
We've only got the five reviews this issue. That might not seem like many—we needed the space for the Top 100—but a good number of those five are well worth your attention. Take *Final Fantasy XIV*, which, with *Stormblood*, now makes a compelling case for itself as a must-play MMO. Our reviewer, Steven, praised its story, its characters and even its boss fights.

Elsewhere, there's *Rising Storm 2: Vietnam*, a compelling (if somewhat janky) take on multiplayer warfare. Or, if you're looking for something brighter and more arcadey, you can try your luck at the fiendishly difficult *Nex Machina*, or the varied *Caveblazers*. Even in these lean summer months, there's plenty to get stuck into. Here's hoping next month is just as strong.

*Phil Savage*

PHIL SAVAGE  
DEPUTY EDITOR  
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**84** Nex Machina

## This month's red mages...



**STEVEN MESSNER**  
**Specialist in**  
 MMOs, poopsocking  
**Currently playing**  
*Final Fantasy XIV*  
**This month**  
 Made the mistake of agreeing to review an MMO. 70 hours later...



**TYLER WILDE**  
**Specialist in**  
 FPS, panic  
**Currently playing**  
*Rising Storm 2*  
**This month**  
 Muttered, "You weren't there, man," whenever anyone played Jefferson Airplane.



**ANDY KELLY**  
**Specialist in**  
 Adventure, apps  
**Currently playing**  
*Get Even*  
**This month**  
 Continued to claim that Twin Peaks' Dick Tremayne was good. Ludicrous.



**CHRIS SCHILLING**  
**Specialist in**  
 Arcade, heroism  
**Currently playing**  
*Nex Machina*  
**This month**  
 Saw a world overrun by robots. Terrifying, but neon.



**SAMUEL ROBERTS**  
**Specialist in**  
 Adventure, houses  
**Currently playing**  
*Perception*  
**This month**  
 Wandered through a house full of dolls and BioShock references.



**PHIL SAVAGE**  
**Specialist in**  
 Roguelikes, spiders  
**Currently playing**  
*Caveblazers*  
**This month**  
 Killed many digital spiders. Still won't go near the real one in his bath.



**CHRIS THURSTEN**  
**Specialist in**  
 Retro, blasphemy  
**Currently playing**  
*Metro 2033*  
**This month**  
 Finally revealed his perverse opinions on FPS control schemes.

# RISE AGAINST

Thanks to endearing characters and spectacular story, **FINAL FANTASY XIV: STORMBLOOD** is a triumph. *By Steven Messner*

**T**he first time I set foot on the Azim Steppe, a sprawling grassland home to the Mongol-like Xaela, I felt a sense of adventure that I haven't encountered in an MMO in a long time. I had come to this rural pocket of Othard, the new far-eastern continent in *Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood*, to find an exiled prince and convince him to take up arms against the militaristic Garlean empire. It's a story that's almost as old as time, but *Stormblood* breathes new life into this familiar tale with endearing characters who I cared deeply about during my time with them. *Stormblood* isn't just an expansion, it's a *Final Fantasy* game in its own right—and it tells a better story than half of them.

Picking up directly where *Final Fantasy XIV* last update, *Heavensward*, left off, *Stormblood* is a story of oppression and rebellion. At the centre of this tale is Lyse, an exiled Ala Mhigan who becomes the driving force in the movement to liberate her people from the tyrannical Garlean empire.

Lyse is one of the most endearing characters in all of *Final Fantasy*. Not only is she vibrant and charismatic, she's also devoid of the melodrama that drapes most *Final Fantasy* leads like a wet blanket. Even in her lowest moments, Lyse finds the strength to stand on her own, and I've come to

adore her the same way many people adore Cloud, Tidus, or any other *Final Fantasy* protagonists.

In fact, few of *Stormblood*'s characters are the dour emo kids that

the series is known for, and the story is much better for it. The struggle to liberate Gyr Abania and Doma from the Garlean empire is laced with optimism embodied by courageous and confident characters

such as Lord Hien, who never once falters in his conviction to liberate his homeland. When tragedy strikes, it feels poignant and painful because it strikes a hard contrast from the upbeat tone of the story. Despite

**Stormblood has diversified the ways you can level up**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
An Eastern-themed expansion to the already-awesome *Final Fantasy XIV*.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
\$40

**DEVELOPER**  
Square Enix

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel i5-3570K,  
GTX 970, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
MMO

**LINK**  
[www.finalfantasyxiv.com](http://www.finalfantasyxiv.com)



being an MMO, *Stormblood* packs a thematic punch that rivals my favorite RPGs. The siege of Doma castle, for example, ends in a tragedy that, to me, felt just as gut-wrenching as Aeris' death in *Final Fantasy VII*.

My only major gripe is that *Stormblood*'s story is chopped up and sprinkled over the typical grind of an MMO. Compared to the main story quests, which are bursting with drama and exposition, the sidequests are largely forgettable vignettes of inconsequential characters. What's worse, they highlight just how limited *Final Fantasy XIV*'s quest design really is.

## QUEST 'TIL DEATH

Just about every quest involves going to a place, clicking an object, and then returning to the quest giver. The main story quests mask this problem with expert storytelling and boss fights, but sidequests offer very little beyond the experience points they reward. By the time I was halfway to the new level cap of 70, I was fed up with them. Fortunately, *Stormblood* has diversified the ways you can level up. Running dungeons with a group or competing in PvP is so much more fun, and I regret I didn't abandon side quests sooner.

Aside from advancing the story, main quests also tour you through the new areas, and *Stormblood* continues *Final Fantasy XIV*'s legacy of being the most visually stunning MMO I've ever played. Stepping foot in Kugane, a Japanese-style merchant city and main hub for *Stormblood*, I was blown away by the beautiful ornate castle and bustling cobblestone streets.

Every dungeon, every monster, every boss, and every location feels as exquisitely crafted and unique as Kugane. And *Final Fantasy XIV*'s already-brilliant soundtrack, which, with the addition of new songs that have been added in for *Stormblood*, has become of the most eclectic and memorable videogame soundtracks that I've ever heard.

## SCUM AND VILLAINY *The big bads of Doma*

*Final Fantasy* is known as much by its heroes as it is its villains. Here's the three bastards you'll have to fight to liberate Ala Mhigo and Doma.



### ZENOS YAE GALVUS

The main bad guy. Zenos is the crown prince of the Garlean empire, and an utter madman to boot. He'll sacrifice anyone and anything in order to feel the exhilaration of a good fight.



### FORDOLA REM LUPUS

A commander in the Imperial army, Fordola is an Ala Mhigan who despises her own people and will do anything to win the favour of Zenos and, hopefully, a future for herself.



### YOTSUYU

She escaped poverty by becoming a spy for the Garleans. Now she's the viceroy of Doma, and loves getting revenge on her people by grinding them beneath her heel.



*Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood*

Lord Hien fights to liberate Doma from the Garleans.



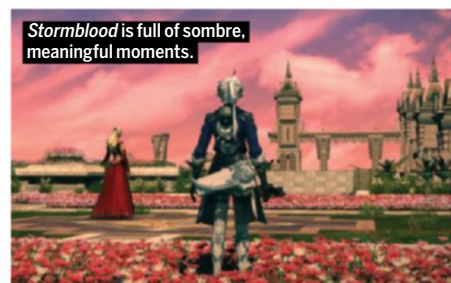
This dungeon boss is a tense dance to avoid attacks



Lyse fights in memory of her father and sister.



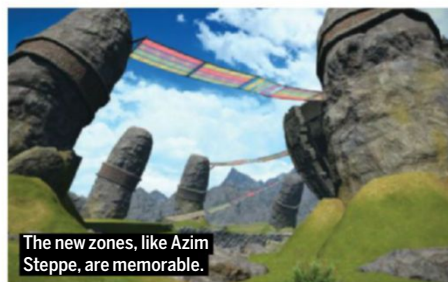
The supporting cast is eclectic and personable.



Stormblood is full of sombre, meaningful moments.



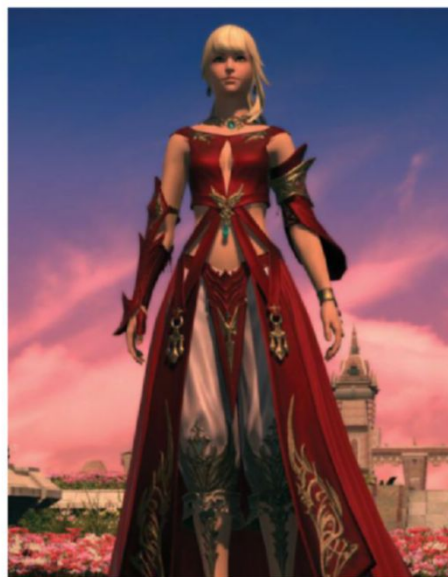
## Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood



The new zones, like Azim Steppe, are memorable.



Yotsuyu has a fetish for stepping on mens' heads.



Speaking of bosses, this one is just batshit crazy.



✧ There's very little that I don't love about Othard and its sweeping grasslands or pristine beaches—except the new underwater zones. Since there's no underwater combat, there's nothing meaningful to do on the seafloor other than some resource gathering and a few quests. Considering what a big deal Square Enix made swimming and diving out to be, the result is disappointing and entirely forgettable unless you and your friends want to roleplay a day at the beach together.

## TAKING UP ARMS

I can't imagine wanting to spend any time sitting on a beach, because I'd rather be tackling *Stormblood's* new group content—which is among the best I've played in any MMO. The new set of dungeons are all fantastic, but the primal boss fights are easily my favorite.

*Stormblood's* boss fights feel like they were inspired by PlatinumGames. Though the combat is still the familiar MMO-style combat, these battles are a spectacle of explosive visuals, stirring music, and singular moments that are batshit crazy. One fight mirrors the first boss battle in *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* when the primal god Susano, who towers over the party, tries to crush them with his gargantuan sword and the tank has to step forward to block the strike with a quick-time event.

The final boss is one of the most satisfying RPG boss fights that I have ever played. I involuntarily yelled, "What the fuck?" because the fight takes such a dramatic and absurd turn after a few minutes. I love that *Stormblood's* primal battles each have these surprising moments that force you to step back from the fight and remember that you're trying to kill something that's supposed to be unimaginably powerful.

Outside of these encounters, *Stormblood's* combat is much improved thanks to a sweeping overhaul to combat's underlying rules and new 'job gauges', a user interface element that feeds you visual information related to your job's playstyle, making each one feel more distinctive and unique than before.

These gauges are best used by *Stormblood's* new jobs, the Red Mage and Samurai. The Red Mage's job gauge, for example, displays black and white mana bars

## RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB *What's happened to the class system?*

*Stormblood's* new job gauges are a unique way of feeding you visual information about your abilities and when they're ready to trigger. Here's a few examples.



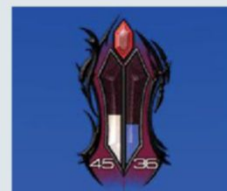
### WHITE MAGE

While healing, lilies appear on the vine that lower the cooldown time of various spells and increase the potency of others.



### MONK

Measures how many Greased Lightning stacks the monk has. Greased Lightning is crucial, as it increases speed and damage.



### RED MAGE

Most spells a Red Mage casts adds black or white mana to their gauge. Keeping a balance is crucial in order to fire off powerful abilities.

that each increase according to what spells you cast. The goal is to keep the two bars balanced, which causes the gem above them to glow red. Red Mages' most devastating abilities use black and white mana in equal measure, so keeping them balanced is absolutely necessary. The Samurai, on the other hand, has three flowery emblems that ignite after completing certain ability combos. When all three are alight, the Samurai can unleash 'Midare Setsugekka,' a devastating sword-strike.

Even without their cool job gauges, the Red Mage and Samurai are a joy to play because of their unique role as both a melee and ranged damage dealer. Knowing when to stand back or when to dive in for a stab, all while balancing white and black mana in battle, is a ton of fun.

While Red Mages and Samurai are new, every other job has been overhauled to the point where, logging in for the first time, I had to acquaint myself with their abilities. For one, you no longer have to level other jobs just to unlock abilities needed for your main one. Likewise, PvP abilities have been greatly simplified, and now have their own hotbar. Along with the fact that PvP is now completely balanced around skill rather than equipment level and offers experience points, it's one of my favorite activities in *Stormblood*.

## THE LONGEST STORY

Sadly, typical to any MMO expansion launch, not all of these adjustments are favorable. As a

White Mage, some of my most useful abilities have been shared with the other healing classes, and the new ones I received aren't very exciting. Players who main Scholar are likewise in despair about changes to their class. It's enough of a letdown that I've resolved to retire my healing staff and pick up a new job for the rest of *Stormblood*.

My only other caveat is that, because *FFXIV* is so story-oriented, if you want to play *Stormblood* as a new player you're going to need to play through what is probably around

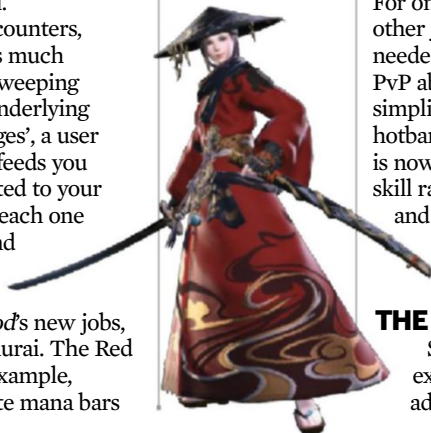
50-plus hours of story. You could skip it by way of the new boost potions Square Enix is offering, but it'll cost you \$50 for the necessary boost to jump into *Stormblood* straight away, and you'll miss all the necessary backstory that makes characters like Lyse so endearing. That said, *Final Fantasy XIV* has been an epic journey so far, and one that I'd recommend as long as you're prepared to spend several dozen hours playing catchup.

Despite that caveat, it's hard for me to feel bitter about *Stormblood's* weaknesses in light of where it succeeds. If you don't like *Final Fantasy XIV* for any reason, I'm not sure *Stormblood* is going to make you change your mind. But as someone who is heavily invested in its world and characters, it is a triumph. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

The story and boss fights aren't just exquisite by MMO standards, but rival even the beloved *Final Fantasy* games.

92



# SICK CAVE

Does procedural platformer **CAVEBLAZERS** steal *Spelunky*'s crown? *By Phil Savage*

**C**aveblazers is a sidescrolling roguelike with random loot and permadeath. As you delve down further into a cave full of riches, you'll encounter powerful enemies and find new gear to kill them with. You'll find gold, and spend it on items and health refills from shrines. You'll find blessings—buffs that can tweak and enhance you build. And you'll die, in many painful, cheap, and amusing ways—often as a result of your own hubris.

On my ninth run I found a blaster. A ranged weapon, it fires a barrage of bullets, but equipping it means a penalty to move speed and jump height. That was a big price to pay, until I realized that, if I shot at the floor, the knockback would propel me upwards, allowing me to jet pack around the room. Suddenly, I could reach previously inaccessible places. The thrill of momentum was intoxicating. Until I blasted straight into a spike pit and died.

A *Spelunky* comparison is inevitable. I don't think *Caveblazers* is as good as *Spelunky*—few games are—but it finds success in how it builds on the simplistic perfection of Mossmouth's dungeon diver. For instance, in *Caveblazers* you have two weapons: One melee, one ranged. This changes how you approach combat encounters and the abilities of the monsters you face. Many can close distance quickly, forcing you to make a split-second decision. Do you stand your ground and battle, or try to

increase the gap—giving you the space to pick them off at range? The randomization of weapons and upgrades factors in—maybe you'll end up with an amazing bow, but an underpowered sword, or a powerful axe paired with a hand cannon that's useful in specific situations. The loot defines your build, and changes your strategy each time.

## Caveblazers is quick to punish mistakes, and also desperation

On my 11th run, I found a bow that fired homing arrows. Later, I collected a blessing that caused my arrows to ricochet off walls. This was a powerful combination. My ricocheting homing

arrows bounced and veered towards targets, giving me an incredible long-range advantage. But my melee weapon—an upgraded, demonic scythe—restored one health point for every enemy killed by it. I could play it safe, and inch closer to death with every mistake, or jump into the fray and risk losing more health than I gained. It was my best run to date, made better by the tension at the heart of my build.

### NEED TO KNOW

#### WHAT IS IT?

A 2D platformer with procedurally generated levels and randomized loot.

#### EXPECT TO PAY \$10

#### DEVELOPER Rupeck Games

#### PUBLISHER The Yogscast

#### REVIEWED ON Reviewed on: R9 Fury X, i5-3570K CPU, 16GB RAM

#### MULTIPLAYER None

#### LINK [www.rupeck.com/caveblazers](http://www.rupeck.com/caveblazers)

*Caveblazers* is quick to punish mistakes, and also desperation. You'll find potions but, in classic roguelike style, they're unidentified. Maybe they'll restore health or increase your melee or ranged damage stats. Maybe they'll decrease those stats, or worse. Health restoration items are a big deal, and rare, and the price of filling your health bar at shrines becomes increasingly prohibitive as you move deeper into the dungeon. You can befriend AI dungeon delvers to help soak up some of the damage, but they can also be a liability. Everything is a risk down in the dark.

### BLAZE IT

On my 12th run, still fresh off the high of my previous attempt, I made a dumb mistake with some Jumpers—difficult, highly mobile monsters that explode on contact. I limped towards the first boss encounter, and, seeing that it was the flying cube, decided to try my luck with a potion. I drink it, and I combust—unceremoniously burning to death only two levels in.

The bosses are my least favorite part of *Caveblazers*, largely because of the repetition. As a challenge, they're fine—there are bosses I can kill without taking a hit, but who'll still punish a lapse in concentration. But, unlike in regular play, these encounters mostly remain the same, no matter the build. A better bow may make things quicker, but that only affects the length of the fight, not how I approach it. Despite this misstep, though, *Caveblazers* is an excellent procedural platformer. It's slightly looser and less intricate than *Spelunky*, but it scratches the same itch—offering plenty of variety, and a difficult, yet rewarding, challenge that's fun to unravel. ■

## MONSTER BASH *Have fun killing these jerks*



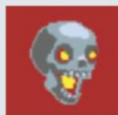
**BAT**  
Home: Caves  
Difficulty: ★★☆☆☆  
Not as aggravating as *Spelunky*'s bats. They only attack with an easily avoidable dash.



**JUMPER**  
Home: Caves  
Difficulty: ★★★★★  
More aggravating than *Spelunky*'s bats. They jump, dash and explode on impact.



**HOBGOBLIN**  
Home: Everywhere  
Difficulty: ★★☆☆☆  
Basic melee warriors. Just keep bashing them with a sword until they fall down.



**KULLO**  
Home: Ancient Temple  
Difficulty: ★★★★★  
Annoyingly manoeuvrable floating skulls.



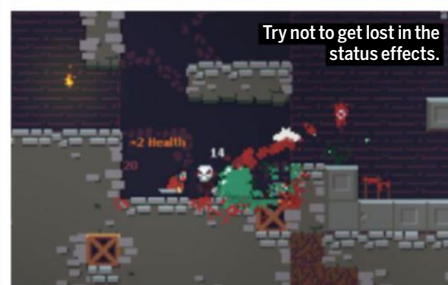
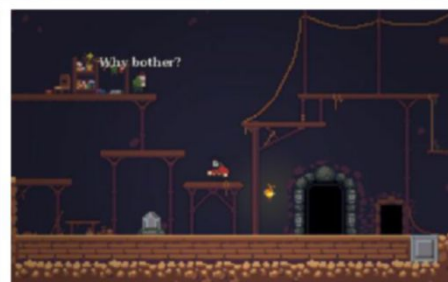
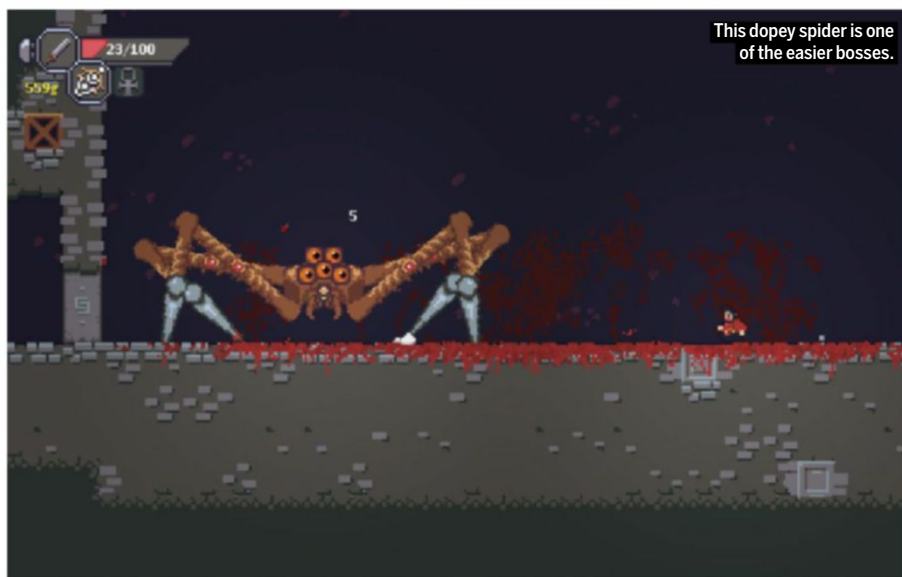
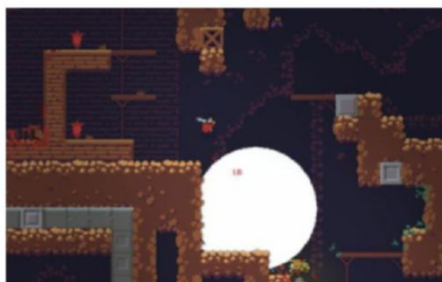
**TROLL**  
Home: Fungal Grotto  
Difficulty: ?????  
They're big and they smash tiles. I've been picking them off at range like a coward.

### PC GAMER VERDICT

A varied, challenging platformer that's adept at forcing improvisation and punishing mistakes.

84





# WAR IS HELL

Chaos rules in **RISEING STORM 2: VIETNAM**'s take on large-scale guerilla warfare. *By Tyler Wilde*

**T**he latest from Tripwire and Antimatter is a lateral move: The same 64-player WWII battles of *Red Orchestra*, now in Vietnam, with assault rifles, helicopters, and tunnels. Where *Battlefield* provides military playgrounds with solo activities for everyone, *Rising Storm 2* demands commanders, squad leaders, and pilots lead teams of GIs to victory. Soldiers are fragile, long lives are unlikely, and every kill is a feat of marksmanship.

Even with how hard it is to hit moving clumps of pixels among the jungle's browns and greens, having 64 automatic or semi-automatic weapons on the field makes open spaces deadly. No longer can players dance around each other, swinging the long barrels of Springfields and Karabiner 98ks, firing, missing, and firing again as if playing *Unreal Tournament* instagib. Close-quarters meetings are resolved near-instantly with AKs and M16s. I miss that test of reflexive, single-shot marksmanship, though in its place *Rising Storm 2* increases the importance of battlefield intel, smoke grenades, and speed.

The most exciting moments of *Rising Storm 2* are when you wiggle your way into a blind spot, which is why I prefer defence. Individual power is muted while attacking a point—getting your body on the point is all that matters—but as a defender there's more time to seek out a dominant position from which to suppress whole squads. It can rarely be done alone, though.

Communication is vital, and what *Red Orchestra* and *Rising Storm* remain great at is getting players to approach battles in physical terms. Excepting the cries of, "Get on the point," we don't talk much about gun balance or game systems, but of hillsides and LZs and flanks.

As in previous *Red Orchestra* games, the teams are asymmetrical, pitting armies with different equipment and tactics against each other. The rivalry between the AK and M16 is probably the most famous

in history, and they're absolutely different in *Rising Storm 2*. The M16's design and smaller calibre gives it less recoil, for instance, while the AK is more lethal. But this distinction means less than the distinction between bolt-action and semi-auto rifles we saw in *Rising Storm*. To play up the asymmetry further, *Rising Storm 2* somewhat unsuccessfully applies

it to how players spawn.

Americans can spawn on their squad leaders, and in the new Supremacy mode—which is similar to

**I have never had trouble finding a full or near-full server**

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A 64-player objective-based FPS with heavy focus on team tactics.

### EXPECT TO PAY

\$25

### DEVELOPER

Antimatter Games, Tripwire Interactive

### PUBLISHER

Tripwire Interactive

### REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Intel Core i5-3570, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GTX Titan

### MULTIPLAYER

64 players

### LINK

[www.rs2vietnam.com](http://www.rs2vietnam.com)

*Battlefield*'s Conquest mode, in that teams can capture any point at any time—they can also spawn in helicopters. The People's Army is more limited: They can't spawn on their squad leaders, but on 'squad tunnels' dug by their leaders. It's more fun to spawn on my squad leader than it is to pop out of a tunnel at a secluded corner of the map, and it adds the subgoal of protecting my leader. Americans also get another goal: Destroy squad tunnels. I want the sides to play differently, but here one is more fun than the other.

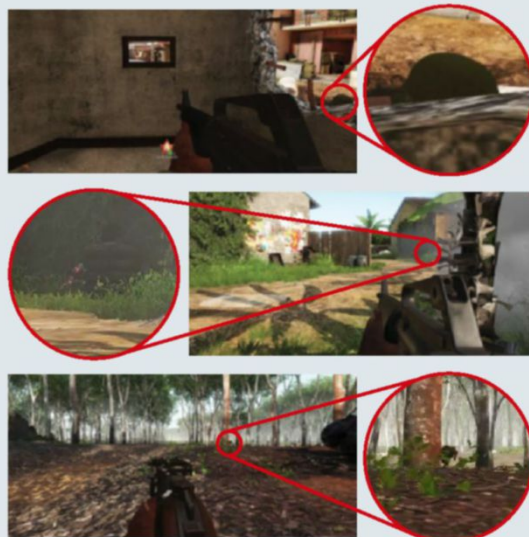
## HEROES OF THE STORM

Supremacy can be a slog, and I much prefer the linear attack or defend Territories mode the series is known for. Fortunately, Tripwire and Antimatter are among the few left making proper PC multiplayer games. You join matches through a server browser, servers have their own cultures, sometimes with bespoke rules and Discord invites in their welcome text. There are already player-made maps circulating in a few servers, and they autodownload when you join. I've never had trouble finding a full or near-full server running the mode I want.

Movement in *Rising Storm 2* can be finicky, and the game is plain in terms of its visuals, but the series remains unique for emphasising fragility over power. *Rising Storm 2* puts more destructive capability in each player's hands, which can make you a team hero or smack your screen to blackness the second you stick your head out of cover. It portrays how individuals can be directed at large scales to produce different outcomes, winning or losing through the accumulation of small victories among countless losses. ■

## WHERE'S CHARLIE?

*Knowing where to aim is the first step in aiming, which is easier said than done*



## PC GAMER VERDICT

A fiery test of speed and accuracy which maintains the series' devotion to teamwork and authenticity.

**85**



*Rising Storm 2: Vietnam*



These burned trees are one of the few standout visual details.



Helicopters can ferry troops to vital points, but they're vulnerable.



Surprise enemies by lying down on their hill and acting like you belong there.



In Supremacy, you win by capturing territories.



When in doubt, point your gun where everyone else is pointing.

# UNEVEN

**GET EVEN** is a bleak, gritty revenge thriller that can't decide what kind of game it wants to be. *By Andy Kelly*

**C**ole Black doesn't know who he is or why he's trapped in a creepy asylum where the patients all wear weird VR headsets. And, by extension, neither do you. This is a game about a man piecing his fragmented jigsaw puzzle of a brain together, and the revelations come thick and fast: About your past, your flaws, and about the girl you see dying in an explosion in the prologue. It's a twisting labyrinth of a plot, with some interesting beats, and a lot of quite hokey, predictable ones. But the problem with *Get Even* isn't really the story itself, but how it's told.

The asylum is a hub of sorts. You wander its grimy, dilapidated hallways, occasionally having to kill aggressive patients who lunge at you from the shadows, guided by an unseen man who seems to be studying you. Black's increasingly frustrated demands to be told what's going on are ignored or brushed off, making you feel just as bewildered as he is. But as you explore the asylum you find photographs that will gradually fill the empty hole in his brain with simulations of memories. Interact with a photo, and you relive, and play, a moment in Black's life.

It's when you dive into his subconscious that things get shooty, triggering a mutation from slow exploration and survival horror-style puzzles to unremarkable gunplay and stealth. The shooting and sneaking feel rough, despite the best efforts of the extremely silly, but entertaining,

Corner Gun. As its name suggests, you can use this high-tech weapon to shoot around corners. Hit Q or E, and it'll poke its little head around cover, letting you shoot people via a camera feed. It's videogamey as hell, but I kinda like that about it.

**It would have been better without the first-person combat**

But once the novelty wears off, you're left with a basic FPS with dim AI and a grim personality. *Get Even* is at its best when the focus shifts to exploration and atmosphere. The environments are drab mazes of corridors, but there's some nice worldbuilding in the form of reports and other documents to fill out the story. Less successful are the constant tonal shifts. One minute it's drifting into horror, but not pulling it off, and the next you've put a detective hat on and are scanning for clues.

As a result, *Get Even* feels like someone has clumsily hammered a dozen different games together, and

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A psychological thriller with some psychological shooting.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
\$30

**DEVELOPER**  
The Farm 51

**PUBLISHER**  
Bandai Namco

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel i7-5820K, GTX 1070, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.getevengame.com](http://www.getevengame.com)

the result is a feeling of constant incoherence. It's a true master of none, trying many genres and styles, and none of them feel like they were given as much care and attention as they perhaps needed. Which is a shame, because there's some genuine imagination and invention going on here. I like how you regularly flick between different apps on your phone, for example using the UV light to show up hidden footprints, or the map to see where an enemy is looking. It's integrated well, and intuitive to use.

## PHONING IT IN

There are some nice touches, like the enemy I killed who dropped his phone, through which I could hear his wife wondering what happened to him. And I like the way you can conjure up cover and alternate paths with the scanner. I won't bother explaining how this works, because it's nonsense. Just know that being able to spirit a van or a wall out of thin air in a firefight is very handy. But for every spark of brilliance, there's a lot of boring wandering, puzzling, and shooting to slog through. And I never found myself caring about Black, which dampened the effect of the story's twists. His voice is great, though. More gruff northern protagonists, please.

There's ambition and imagination on display in *Get Even*, and I wish I liked it more than I do. But I feel like it would have been better without the first-person combat. I'm compelled to learn more about Black's past, but then I have to kill or sneak past some guys and everything grinds to a halt. A confusing tangle of a game, then, but the mystery-laden storyline might just be enough to pull you through the weaker action moments. ■

## RING OF POWER *The apps on Cole Black's high-tech phone*



### SCANNER

Scan objects to discover important clues about the story and recover fragmented memories.



### VISION

Detects thermal signatures. Useful for picking enemies out in a dark room. Also used to solve puzzles.



### MAP

Shows you a detailed map of your surroundings, as well as the vision cones of nearby enemies.



### INBOX

Occasionally you'll receive text messages from people, usually of the cryptic, creepy variety.



### LIGHT

An ultraviolet light that reveals hidden details, like the remains of peoples' footprints.



### MEMOIR

A log of the game's confusing, twist-filled story, updated automatically as you play.

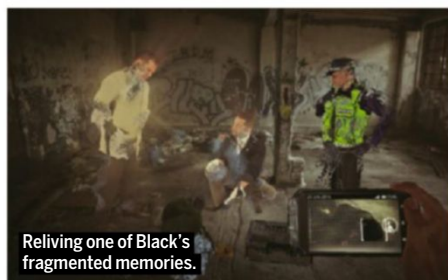
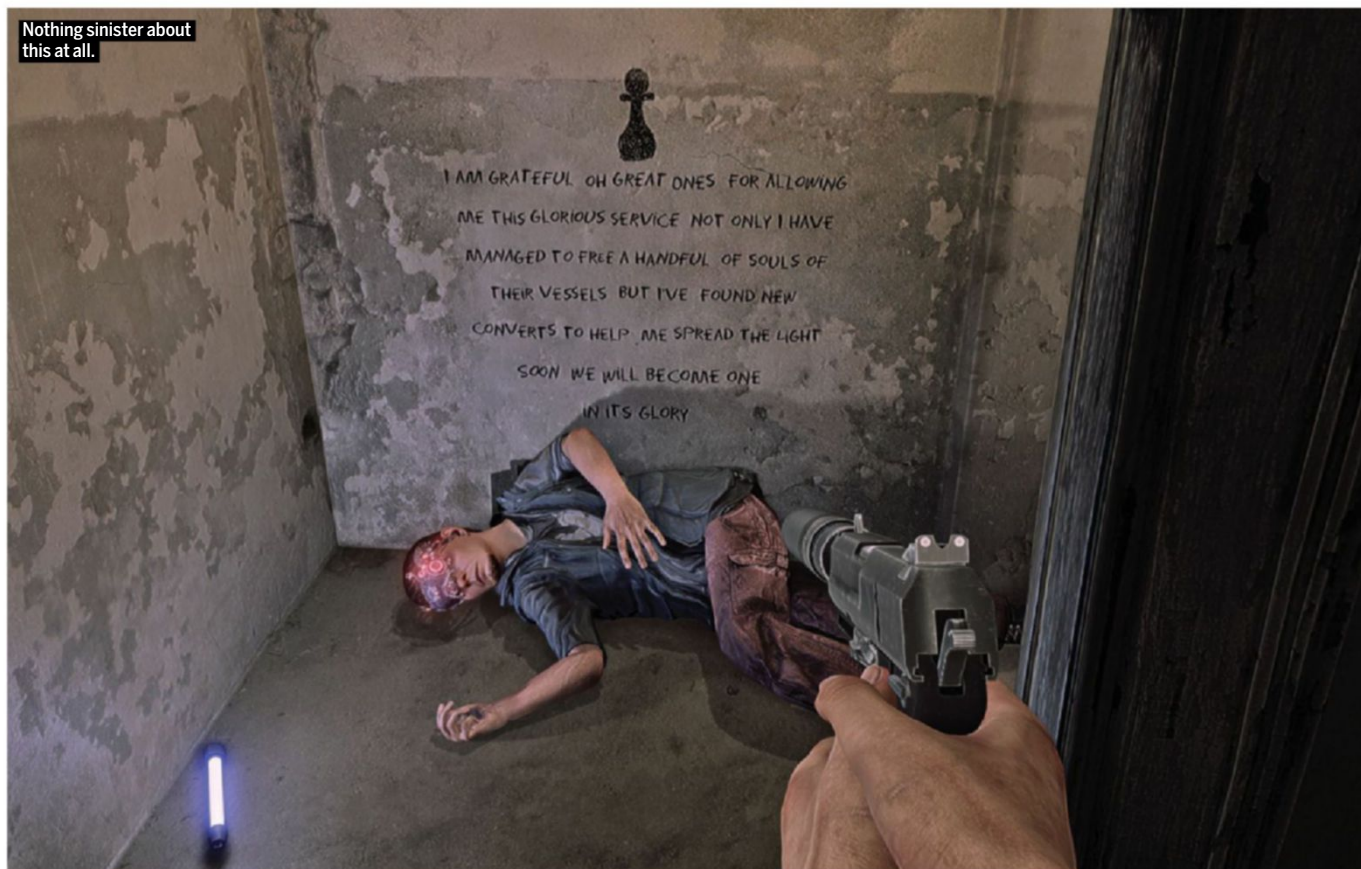
## PC GAMER VERDICT

A messy, unfocused mishmash of genres. There are some good ideas hidden under the surface, though.

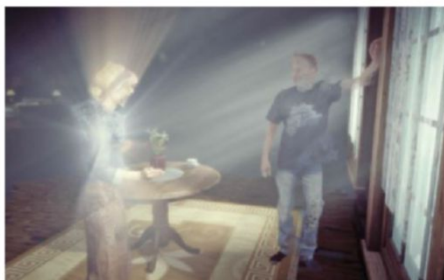
66



Nothing sinister about this at all.



Reliving one of Black's fragmented memories.



The scanner will tell you more about this.



The moment that sets the story off.



The phone interface is slickly designed.

# EXPERT FINNISH

Focused, intense and hugely replayable, **NEX MACHINA** is the best twin-stick shooter in ages. *By Chris Schilling*

**W**hat the hell just happened? Your first go of *Nex Machina* will leave you feeling pleasantly dazed, as this exhilarating and ferociously tough twin-stick shooter from Finland-based Housemarque sucks you in and spits you back out almost immediately. It's the kind of game to make you shuffle forward a little in your seat, as you take a deep breath and prepare to dive in for another attempt.

It dispenses with the niceties to get you into the action that much quicker. All you need to know is that it's sometime in the future, we've all been too busy gawping at our phones to notice the machines getting smarter than us, and lo and behold, they're keen to assert their authority over humans by wiping us out. As the game starts, your brave little warrior rides into the fray on their futuristic space bike, leaps off, and mayhem subsequently ensues.

The default difficulty setting on the main Arcade mode is called Rookie: That name alone will encourage a certain type of player to scoff and start on the next level up, Experienced, but *Nex Machina* tells you this is the ideal place to learn the ropes for a reason. You should take that advice—not least since Housemarque pulls off one of the hardest tricks in games. Often, with this type of game, the lowest difficulty can feel slightly patronising, as if it's going easy on you. That's not the case here. The action is still intense. The arenas are still cramped. Enemies still march toward you relentlessly. The point of difference is that they move slower and explode

quicker, so you don't quite get that why-won't-you-die horror as you retreat, furiously unloading into a spider tank that's soaking up the best you can dish out, and asking you if that's all you've got.

Even so, you'll still get those moments where your back's against the wall, and you're barely a pixel's width from death when an aggressor falls, and you yell out in relief and stroll forward straight into a bright pink projectile has been floating lazily towards you for the past several minutes (in reality: Two seconds).

Complacency is ruthlessly punished.

But daring? Now daring can get you somewhere. *Nex Machina* is tailored towards moments of mad heroism, as each level gives you a number of humans to rescue before they're harvested. Your high score depends on how many you save, but also on the timing of their retrieval: After grabbing one, a combo meter will drain, refilling when you rescue the next. Then again, worrying about your own survival is priority one.

Still, even here you're encouraged to take the odd risk. Rather than having to constantly back away from

waves of enemies. You can press the left trigger to dash in whichever direction you choose. When all seems lost, this can get you out of the tightest of squeezes, not least once you've collected a pickup which triggers a small explosion for each dash. Pair that with a triple-dash power-up, and you're laughing.

## VOXEL NOVA

There are optimal routes through the mayhem, but they have to be teased out over dozens upon dozens of attempts. Until then, you're adapting, improvising, desperately trying to control the flow of enemies while attempting to prioritize threats.

It's a lovely game to watch, too, the dashes adding dynamism to your character's movement, the bright, color-coded outlines ensuring the action stays readable even when things are exploding into thousands of voxels around you. Even the transitions between stages are glorious: The six worlds take place on complex superstructures, which your hero navigates by jet pack.

To some, six worlds might seem a shade on the slender side, especially since a single run takes less than an hour. Beyond tackling the Arcade mode on higher difficulties, there's an Arena mode for individual worlds and variants where bullets and enemy spawns move faster, or where your score only increases while your human combo is still running.

For the voracious consumer, who sees games only as something to devour and tick off rather than savor, that might not seem like good value. Everyone else, however, should buckle up for a breathless modern arcade classic that delivers more thrills per minute than almost anything else out there. ■

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A supercharged shooter in the vein of *Robotron 2084*.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
\$20

**DEVELOPER**  
Housemarque

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i5-4440,  
GeForce GTX 645,  
8GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Two-player local co-op

**LINK**  
[www.housemarque.com/games/nexmachina/](http://www.housemarque.com/games/nexmachina/)



## KILL LIST *The worst ways to die in Nex Machina*

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>1</b><br>Being shot by the last enemy.<br><b>Probability: 1/10</b><br>- Doesn't happen that often, but when it does... | <b>2</b><br>Forgetting to dash through a laser.<br><b>Probability: 2/10</b><br>- Well, max weapon level can make you feel invincible. | <b>3</b><br>Accidentally dashing into a laser.<br><b>Probability: 3/10</b><br>- Easily done when backing off from a cluster of enemies. | <b>4</b><br>Mobbed en route to a shield pickup.<br><b>Probability: 5/10</b><br>- Don't fall for the bait! Oh, look, we have. Again. | <b>5</b><br>Picking up a sword before the boss.<br><b>Probability: 8/10</b><br>- Every. Sodding. Time. This one irks us the most. |
|---|---|---|---|---|

## PC GAMER VERDICT

Slight in form, but deep and consistently satisfying. *Nex Machina* is a gem of a shoot-'em-up.

89





Hey, you try taking screenshots of a game this relentless.



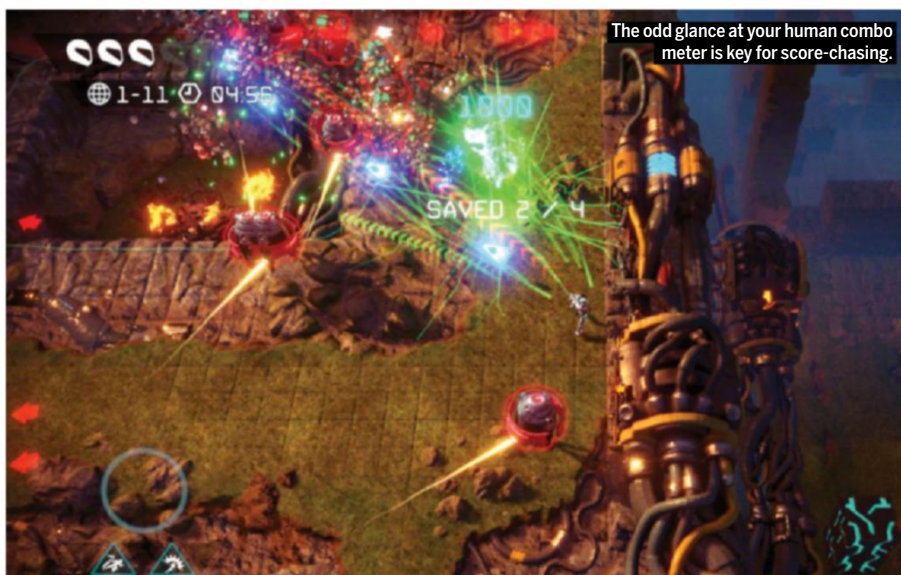
Clusters of voxels near a level's edge can form bridges.



Secret stages seem harder than the regular ones, but will boost your score.



Boss fights are fun, but are less exciting than what precedes them.



The odd glance at your human combo meter is key for score-chasing.



Her face said it all.

# EXTRA+LIFE

## CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



## “I’m too drunk on wealth to realize how undeserved my windfall is”

Realizing that money is a curse in **ELITE DANGEROUS**

**W**hen the *Horizons* update was released for *Elite Dangerous*, the fine folk at Frontier filled my space bank account with credits so I could test the new features without having to dip into my own pocket—which was empty anyway. Suddenly, I went from having a few thousand credits, which is basically spare change in *Elite*, to being a multimillionaire. People sink hundreds of hours into the game and earn only a fraction of that, but I was too drunk on wealth to realize how utterly undeserved my windfall was.

Like Richard Pryor in classic 1995 comedy *Brewster’s Millions*, I immediately start throwing money around like a fool. My reliable old Cobra gets scrapped, replaced by an Anaconda battleship fitted with the best weapons and upgrades. At 147 million credits it’s not even the most expensive

### ANDY KELLY



**THIS MONTH**  
Got bored of being rich,  
in space.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Dirt Rally*

ship in the game, but for many it’s a reward for hours of toil. I feel like some toff who casually buys a London flat with his inheritance that it would take a hard-working family a lifetime to afford.

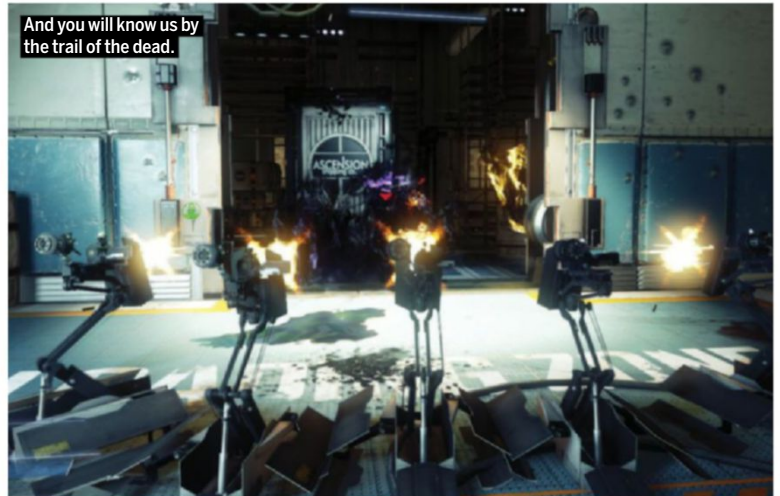
So I’m tooling around in my Anaconda like the King of Space, when suddenly I feel lost. Before Frontier’s cash injection, getting money (and dying trying) had been my main motivation in *Elite*. Patiently trying to earn the 6 million required to purchase an Asp by cashing in bounties and exploring the galaxy. But now that I have all the money in the world and can buy

as many Asps as I want, I’m bored. I feel like some jaded, lonely old lord pottering around in his big, dusty mansion waiting for the bloodline to die out.

Money is everything in *Elite*. The reason you fight, the reason you explore. And when you don’t have to struggle for it anymore, the game suddenly feels hollow. Empty. To compensate, I start living an extravagant lifestyle. I drop 84 million on a Beluga Liner just to see what it flies like, then I trade it back in at a massive loss. I’m an affront to hardworking commanders everywhere. I see other players in Haulers going about their business, moving cargo, trading,

**MONEY IS EVERYTHING IN ELITE.  
THE REASON YOU FIGHT, THE  
REASON YOU EXPLORE**





## “The fight is over in a few chaotic seconds”

Proving that lead is the deadliest element in **PREY**

▶ JON MORCOM



**THIS MONTH**  
Recycled with a vengeance.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Fallout 4: Nuka-World,*  
*Dishonored*

making an honest wage. I wonder if they think I'm some high-level player who busted his ass for this Anaconda, rather than the monied fraud that I am.

I take on a few bounty missions, but they're trivial. There's no pleasure to be found in blasting tiny, helpless pirate ships apart in an Anaconda. Well, there is, but it's short-lived. So I decide it's time to give up my riches. If there was a way to transfer credits to another player in *Elite*, I would have given my millions to some random commander in a Hauler and passed the curse onto them. But there isn't, so the only solution to the problem is wiping my save. I take the Anaconda for one last flight—it does feel really nice being behind the wheel of this thing—then I take a deep breath and erase myself from existence.

### RICHES TO RAGS

I start a new game. I have 1,000 credits and a Sidewinder, and I feel like my life has purpose again. I plug myself back into the economy, sweating away with the working Joes. And I don't miss my fortune. I'll never be able to afford another Anaconda, but I don't need one. Just being able to afford my own Asp will be equally satisfying. I take off, set a course for deep space, and begin a new adventure, free from the shackles of opulence. In the distance, the world's smallest violin plays for me. ■

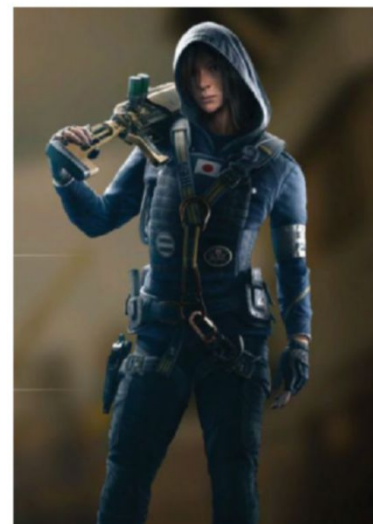
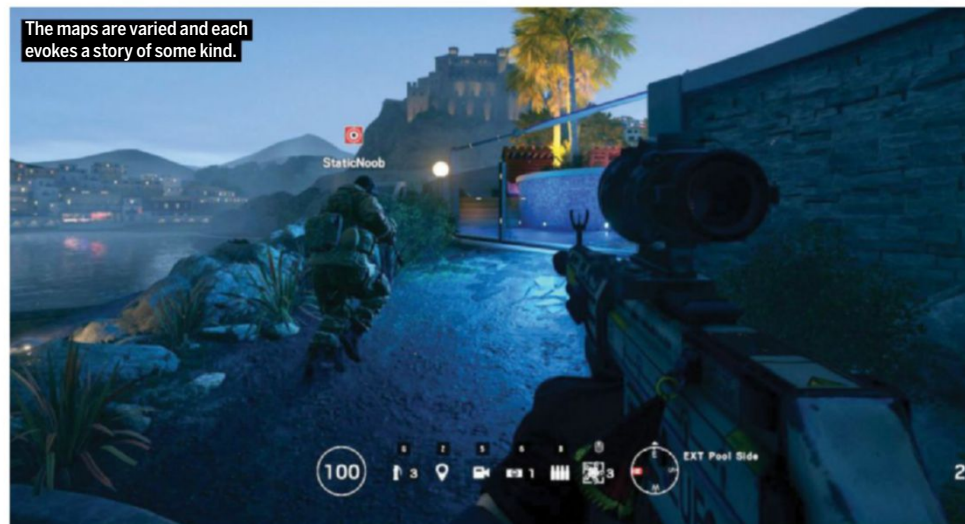
**F**or most of the time in *Prey*, your character Morgan Yu is able to roam free on Talos I—free to live life as a mug, free to roll through narrow gaps disguised as a tomato, free to explore the station's secrets and pick it clean of its hidden bounty. One key point where the game *does* wrest control from you is when you're locked out of the station by big brother Alex, who's angry because you seem intent on destroying Talos I. What follows is a fetch quest, but one that gives you agency to stage manage a satisfying set piece.

I've just ejected into space when prescient, no-nonsense security chief Sarah Elazar alerts me over comms to the existence of a hull breach in the cargo bay. It might provide me with a point of ingress back into the station. I head into Shipping and Receiving to find a group of survivors. They're watching warily through the windows of Cargo Bay B where Typhon Con 2032 appears to be under way. A number of *Prey*'s

least accommodating enemies are pacing behind the door I need to get through. Elazar has the door code, but she's not giving it up unless I secure some firepower to deal with the Typhon. What's that you say, Sarah? The turret fabrication plan is outside in a safe only accessible through the hull breach? And I'm the only one with a TranStar suit and propulsion unit? Oh, alright then, I'll go.

Elazar seems unimpressed when I return with the turret fabrication plan and won't be happy until I've placed at least three of the things in the loading zone outside Cargo Bay B. I return to the fuel storage bay to repower the recycler and fabricator. Bodies and loose equipment litter the area, yielding the materials required to recycle and fabricate the ordnance Elazar's heart so desires. Eventually, I have seven fortified turrets lined up ready to bring no small amount of spectacle and a whole world of pain to the gathering Typhon.

The fight is over within a few chaotic seconds. It's not a gib-fest, but the turrets have obliterated all the Typhon organisms in a shower of sparks and shimmering splatters of goo. A relieved Elazar says with some optimism, "I feel like we have a chance now." In a game where drinking vessels are not always what they seem, she rather endearingly sees hers as being half full. Hmm, you hang on to that thought, Sarah. ■



# “It’s like Overwatch, but for military nerds”

Putting a beating heart in tense military shooter **RAINBOW SIX SIEGE**

**H**aving bounced off the game’s open beta many moons ago, I’d all but forgotten about *Siege* until strong word of mouth tempted me back. On paper, the core concept of two five-person teams, one trying to break the other’s defenses, was always strong. I love asymmetric multiplayer games, and the destructible environments gave *Siege* something extra special. Yet perhaps the most interesting thing for me was the diversity of the game’s cast, called Operators. They’re the heroes you choose before each round, dictating your weapons and abilities.

And, goodness, Ubisoft has done it. I adore this game now. With its huge array of heroes, it’s like *Overwatch* for military nerds—swapping out the fast ride for a harsher slow burner. The game has the tension I’ve come to adore in games over the past few years, but distilled into a smaller scale, where luck feels much less a factor.

That’s a perfect formula for a cracking Tom Clancy shooter, but the thing that’s kept me fixated on the game is that cast. If you like to play games as not-another-white-man then this has folks from all over the world, with a fair portion of them women. It’s quietly inclusive, just lacking in personality.

## SAM GREER



**THIS MONTH**  
Wrote 99% of the internet’s *Rainbow Six Siege* fan fiction.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Raiders of the Broken Planet*,  
*Black Desert Online*

Their in-game character backgrounds are dreadfully plain, but also devoid of detail. As such, I’ve spent much of my time imagining much more interesting histories for them, including inter-team relationships of the queer variety.

My favorite operator is Yumiko ‘Hibana’ Imagawa. A Japanese operative, formerly of the SAT, she’s been raised in archery, traveled to train with various special forces around the world. That’s all Ubisoft gives us.

I imagine her not as a meek, quiet ninja, but a foul-mouthed rogue. Not quite cocky, but confident all the same. She feels like an outsider, never having settled in one place, but as part of Rainbow, she’s found herself opening up

to Elena ‘Mira’ Alvarez. Mira’s a wrench monkey, but her time serving on Rainbow has left her homesick. Having never felt anywhere to be home, it’s Mira’s sense of place that Hibana finds solace in. The two have a loving relationship on the down low. Of course, there’s more. The online, long-distance dating between IQ and Valkyrie. Or Frost’s secret past as an escaped convict. Those are the tame ones.

## STRANGER THAN FICTION

Does any of this matter? It certainly makes me enjoy the game more, playing as characters instead of cogs in a machine. Being in a party of five (the ideal way to experience the game) makes it feel like an action movie about a ragtag bunch of misfits, with down time between shootouts spent fleshing out our characters. The game’s devoid of a plot but the maps are evocative; an embassy in a city during a riot, a favela at night under fireworks. They seem part of a world that at least lets you imagine some context for your daring.

If you’ve been looking for a multiplayer game with a diverse cast that isn’t *Overwatch*, then *Siege* might be the slower paced alternative for you. It’s not as explicitly queer as *Overwatch* has become, but come on... it’s called Team Rainbow. ■

**I’VE SPENT MUCH OF MY TIME IMAGINING MUCH MORE INTERESTING HISTORIES FOR THEM**



# “Before we’ve started, a crew member dies, and half the hull is up in smoke”

Swimming with the jillyfishes in **SUNLESS SEA: ZUBMARINER**

**B**ack when I was a naïve teenager, I was really into Pirates of the Caribbean. And I mean, *really*. The kind of person who had Jack Sparrow posters on her wall, Pirates cushions, Pirates T-shirts, even Pirates PJs. Thankfully, those days are long gone now—even I won’t defend Pirates 4—but after thoroughly enjoying Pirates 5 at the cinema (anyone who didn’t belly-ache at that guillotine scene can fight me), I’ve had an itch to revisit Failbetter’s nautical roguelike, *Sunless Sea*. I had to abandon it after several crews started eating their own limbs before we’d even set sail, but with its unplayed *Zubmariner* expansion still docked in my Steam library, I thought, like Pirates, I’d give it a second chance.

It turns out my captaining skills are still as rusty as Orlando Bloom’s acting, but this time I was determined to claim one of its highly illegal submarines. First, I had to head to somewhere called Port Carnelian, a distant colony on the southeast coast, where my journal tells me zubmariners still collude in secret.

With no map to guide me, I leave Fallen London and head into the darkness. I’m barely out of the shallows, however, when my engine bursts into flames after some overzealous

## KATHARINE BYRNE



**THIS MONTH**  
Almost got eaten by a huge sea monster

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Impact Winter*

acceleration. The game gives me the chance to save the wounded, but the story’s invisible dice roll is cruel. Before we’ve started, a crew member dies, and half the hull is up in smoke.

To reassure the remaining survivors they won’t immediately die in another ball of fire, I shore up on nearby Mutton Island and head for the pub. Just as we’re about to leave, though, I spy a woman in distress on the beach. I rush to her aid, but suddenly she slithers into the sea, revealing herself as merely the tip of a terrible monster’s tail. I run back to the ship as fast as possible, but just as we cross the gangway, another zailor goes crunch behind me.

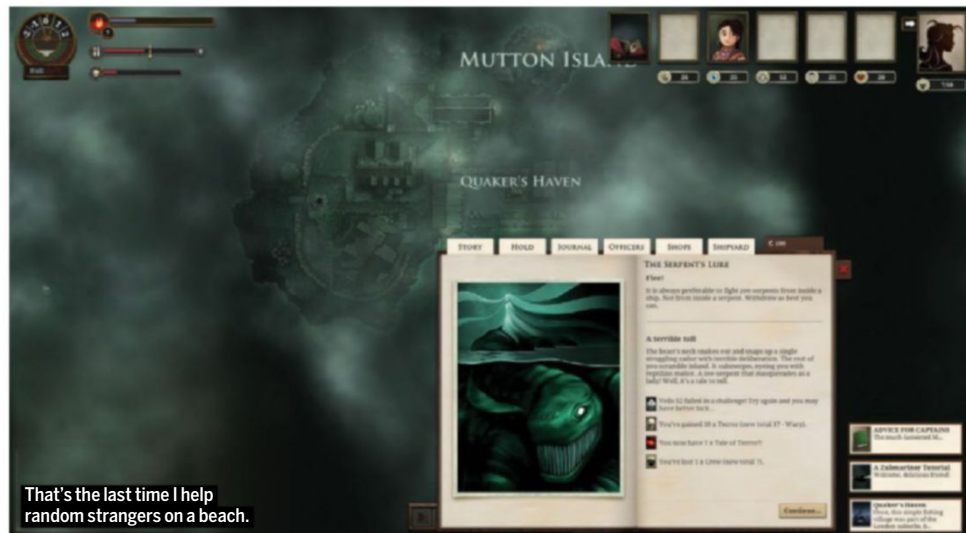
## IT TURNS OUT MY CAPTAINING SKILLS ARE STILL AS RUSTY AS ORLANDO BLOOM’S ACTING

## PARLEY

The mood’s now as sour as Bill Nighy’s stinking squid beard, but it’s not long before my lookout spies further trouble. Just above, the false stars in this subterranean cavern start blinking—a rare and ominous event, my journal says, but also fortuitous if you record the new constellation. Things can’t get any worse, I think, but apparently, they can. Three stars disappear, and someone starts sobbing in the distance.

With our sanity dwindling and our supplies practically spent, I press on. Eventually, we hit the map’s farthest corner without even glimpsing our goal. As tempting as it is to stop at Kingeater’s Castle, though, I don’t want my crew getting ideas. I double back, only to find a jillyfish blocking our path. My hull has more holes than the plot of Pirates 3, but somehow we pull through.

Finally, Carnelian creeps into view. We made it! In my excitement, however, I miss the Dreadnought hiding in the fog, and one shot sends us to Davy Jones’ locker. So much for standing atop our sinking mast and defiantly strolling ashore. If anything, my crew’s probably quite relieved. I am too, to be honest. I might not have a zubmarine, but at least I’ll be closer to barnacle-face Bloom. After all, he’s always been the hot one. ■





If you don't think your PC can handle *Pilgrim*, turn down the contrast on your monitor instead.

# 1 DREAD THE COMMONWEALTH

**MOD** Must be the season of the witch

**I**nspired by horror film *The Witch*, the modders behind *Fallout 4*'s *Photorealistic Commonwealth* mod have transformed Bethesda's RPG into a desaturated, moody, and cinematic experience, with far more realistic camera and weather effects.

*Pilgrim: Dread the Commonwealth* features lens emulation, film grain, and a new tone mapping method. The advanced camera trickery goes hand-in-hand with *Pilgrim*'s fresh weather plugin, which sees fancier fog, rain, and storms being introduced to the newly bleak wasteland on a regular basis. Moreover, there's an all-new, dynamic soundtrack that ties into that weather system, with the playlist shuffling about to support the damp,

foggy, or weakly sunny mood of the outside world.

It's not the mod to come to if you want more story content for *Fallout 4*, although the team is working on a new character model for Dogmeat, with the aim of replacing your beloved companion with the freaky, demonic goat from the aforementioned film. In the meantime, the devs have retextured the hound, given him a pair of glowing eyes, and toned down his barks to make them "a little less cheerful". Okay, we get it—the apocalypse is bleak. Why not turn Codsworth into Marvin the Paranoid Android while you're at it?

*Pilgrim* is a terrifically spooky mod, although the clunky animation beneath it serves as a reminder that this is still a Bethesda game under the hood.

DOWNLOAD AT [bit.ly/FalloutPilgrim](http://bit.ly/FalloutPilgrim)

2

## HACKNET CAMPAIGNS

**MODS** The Uplink-esque hacking game gets bigger

**D**igital infiltration sim *Hacknet* now has modding support, letting players construct their own campaigns and systems.



### HELLSEC

Join a *Watch Dogs*-ish hacker group named hellSec here, on a mission to cause chaos, and occasionally to help people, by sneaking into restricted computer networks. New music and missions await.

[bit.ly/HackMods1](http://bit.ly/HackMods1)



### HACKER WARS

This is set in a world in which the government pits hacker against hacker, Battle Royale-style. It's not multiplayer, sadly, but squaring up against other coders is a neat idea.

[bit.ly/HackMods2](http://bit.ly/HackMods2)



### THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

An abattoir is up to something dodgy, and it falls to you to expose its crimes, by hacking into its network (password: 'porkloin1'). You'll need the *Labyrinths* DLC in order to play this mod.

[bit.ly/HackMods3](http://bit.ly/HackMods3)



## 3 MEDIAN XL 2017

**MOD** Still playing Diablo II? Then you need this

**T**he creator of *Median XL* describes its mod as the “greatest *Diablo II* full conversion”, and it’s hard to argue. In its previous incarnations, it already brought endgame ‘uberquests’ and freshly planted skill trees, along with a additional items, bosses, and areas—not to mention its own Battle.net-style multiplayer service. This upgrade

crams in even more, including reworked gold drops that you can pick up by walking over them, an upped max character level (it’s now 125), and improvements to the engine so it can support extra environments. If *Diablo III* left you cold, or you can’t get enough monster-slaying, *Median XL* could keep you busy for a lifetime.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/MedianXL](http://bit.ly/MedianXL)



The action RPG genre is in good health lately.

## 4 REDITUM

**FREEWARE** Around the world in about eight minutes

**W**hile it’s a fact that the world is round, the same is very rarely true of the worlds in games. Environments are usually curtailed by mountains, oceans, or, in the worst cases, invisible walls, so we almost never get the pleasure of arriving back where we started, but from a different angle. *Reditum* is a rare game that allows this, its beautiful world

looping back on itself like a tied piece of string. On your quest, you’ll chat with strange people, ride vehicles, and set foot in a variety of colorful climes. It’s an adventure in the *Samorost* mould, meaning wordless dialogue represented by cryptic pictures, no inventory, and art you could hang on the wall.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/Reditum](http://bit.ly/Reditum)



**1 NICE HAT**  
You’re the warden for one of the planet’s suns, and as such it seems bound to you, almost following you around.

**2 SAIL AWAY**  
It wouldn’t be much of a journey without a method of transportation. Your first is this stylish wooden boat.

**3 HOPE FLOATS**  
Hole-Face gives you your enigmatic mission, which has something to do with the sun. Don’t play this for its story.



## 5 MONOLITH

**DEMO** A shmup with a difference. Actually, several

**Y**ou’ll find the full game on Steam now, but if you’re on the fence, you should play the beta demo of this genre hybrid. The trial offers the first three floors of roguelike shooter *Monolith*, putting you in control of a spaceship in a facility full of bullet-spewing monsters and murderous machines. The structure is pure *Binding of Isaac*: You move from room to room in a procedurally generated dungeon, enhancing your arsenal and collecting upgrades, before taking on a series of well-designed bosses straight out of a bullet-hell shooter. It’s rare to play a shmup where you’re allowed to explore at your leisure, and it makes the attractive and challenging *Monolith* feel exciting and new.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/MonolithDemo](http://bit.ly/MonolithDemo)

## 6 BABA IS YOU

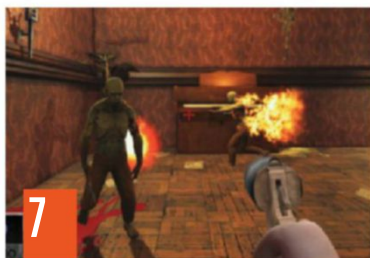
**FREEWARE** Words have real power in this puzzler

**T**he disarmingly cute *Baba Is You* lets you play around with the laws of reality—or its version of reality, anyway. You see those words all over the screen? They're actually physical objects that your character, Baba, can push around. Shove one word free from, for instance, the sentence 'Baba Is You', and you won't be able to move—because 'Baba Is You' will no longer

be true. Words can be separated, or even mixed together, and therein lies the game's genius. You can undo actions at the touch of a button, so it helps to experiment in each level's carefully constructed play space. The aim is to reach, or create an exit point, by reassembling the words. Like all the best puzzlers, this is full of eureka moments.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/BabalsYou](http://bit.ly/BabalsYou)

Look up Alan Hazelden for more ingenious puzzlers.



## 7 BLOOD REMAKE

**DEMO** The cult classic returns

**D**espite the name, the sublimely titled *Blood* isn't quite the goriest FPS in history, a crown that probably belongs to *Brutal Doom*. However, it is a fab, funny *Doom* clone that made the most of its horror theme, taking you on a bloody ride through nearly every iconic horror setting imaginable. It doesn't really need remaking, but the developer behind this fan remake is doing an impressive job anyway, recreating the old Build engine game in full 3D, and in Unity. The finished game won't cost you a penny, but before that here's a demo that contains the early part of undead gunslinger Caleb's ordeal. Alas, the voodoo doll weapon isn't included yet, but it's only a matter of time.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/BloodRemake](http://bit.ly/BloodRemake)



## 8 ALIENS: THE ULTIMATE DOOM

**MOD** In space, no one can hear you gib

**E**ver since the *Aliens TC* mod introduced the Doomguy to Xenomorphs in 1993, *Doom* and *Aliens* have seemed like the perfect match. *Doom* was already a tense game, but *TC* imbued it with suspenseful, monster-free moments, while adding a creepier atmosphere—elements present and correct in the latest *Aliens*-themed conversion for id's landmark series. *Aliens: The Ultimate Doom* takes *Doom*, *Doom II* and *Final*

*Doom*, and uses them to make an *Aliens* campaign, using sprites from Probe's '90s shooter, *Alien Trilogy*.

It might be lacking in modern bells and whistles, but almost everything you might want from an *Aliens* title is here: a motion tracker, lighting system, iconic weapons, and showers of goop. You'll also face off against predators, and androids. Not bad for a human.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/AlienTrilogy](http://bit.ly/AlienTrilogy)





## 9 ADVENTURE JAM

**FREEWARE** The best from the competition

**F**or the past few years, the Adventure Game Jam has been encouraging developers to make story-focused or puzzle-focused games in just a couple of weeks. And as ever, plenty of excellent and interesting things have emerged from the event, including old-fashioned point-and-clicks, *Stanley Parable*-style post-modern experiences, and a game where you have dinner with an owl. (It's called *Dinner with an Owl*, if

you want to look it up.) My pick of the jam is *Void Quest*, a retro curio that eerily resembles the Sierra adventures of yore. It's a game where you interact with the world by typing commands into a text box, via a splendid Google-autocomplete-style suggestion system that will recommend appropriate follow-up words as you type. Give your brain, and indeed your vocabulary, a workout in this unusual puzzle game, and then move onto the following, equally lovely adventures.

## WE'RE JAMMIN'

Take a cursory glance at these point-and-clicks



### 1 PERIDIUM

Here's a Thing-style horror, boasting wonderful pixel art and convincing gore. Unlike many jam games, this is fully voiced.

[bit.ly/AdvJam1](http://bit.ly/AdvJam1)



### 2 LOCH INCH

The Scottish highlands are yours to explore in *The Treasure of Loch Inch*. You play a treasure hunter, armed only with a shovel.

[bit.ly/AdvJam2](http://bit.ly/AdvJam2)



### 3 ID

You wake up in an empty factory in this adventure: a room escape game starring an android. Solve puzzles as you attempt to figure out why you were activated.

[bit.ly/AdvJam3](http://bit.ly/AdvJam3)



## 10 TRACKS

**FREEWARE** Play with an endless model train set

**T**he problem with building an model train set is that they take up a lot of room. Your epic rail network has to incorporate the coffee table, it has to skirt around the sofa, and it's at constant risk from a mischievous cat. Let's give a warm welcome to *Tracks*, then, as this tactile, beautiful game lets you build a model railway in a virtual space, by clicking chunks of

wood together in an endless, ambient void. The smart placement system picks the right track part for the appropriate context, so slotting the bits together is as simple as it is satisfying. If you *like* having to plan your designs around the furniture, you can even bung in some of that too, including dining tables and bunk beds.

**DOWNLOAD AT** [bit.ly/TracksDemo](http://bit.ly/TracksDemo)

# WOLFENDOOM: BLADE OF AGONY

An old-school shooter that feels modern. *By Phil Savage*

**T**he reveal of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* has put me in the mood for some mindless fun. What better way to sate that urge than with more *Wolfenstein*? *WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony* is a *GZDoom* mod and an unofficial successor to *Wolfenstein 3D*. Downloading it, I assumed it would offer an answer to the unasked question: What if id Software had stuck with Nazis, instead of messing around with demons on Mars? In fact, it's so much more.

There are elements of *Wolfenstein*, such as the chunky Aryan bosses dual-wielding arm cannons. And there are elements of *Doom*, notably the combat, which has *Doom*'s pace, if not its plasma gun. But what makes *Blade of Agony* exceptional is that it's more than just PC gaming alt-history fan fiction. This is not *Wolfenstein 3D* by way of *Doom*, but rather *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* by way of two decades of experimentation and dissection from the *Doom* modding community at large.

You play as BJ Blazkowicz, Nazi killer über alles, drawn back to the frontlines after a period of administrative leave. *Blade of Agony*'s first major surprise is its cinematics—specifically, the fact that it has them. It opens on a dolly shot set to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, as Blazkowicz's brother-in-arms Cpt 'Dirty' Douglas Blake types out a letter urging the American beefcake to return to active duty. The way the camera moves through the low-poly room lends an amount of depth and drama to the otherwise retro style.

Blazkowicz returns, of course, but isn't immediately sent to the battlefield. Before each mission, there's a briefing at allied high

command. Here, in an imposing mansion surrounded by picturesque countryside, General Miller sets out the upcoming missions—complete with a slideshow consisting of tactical maps and grainy black-and-white photos. The presentation is on point: The mansion is full of detail. The walls are covered in flags, and accurate posters of WWII-era films, such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Hitler—Dead or Alive*.

I'm not au fait with the limitations of id Tech 1, but it's clear that much of this is only possible thanks to the innovations of source ports like *GZDoom*. While *Blade of Agony* looks similar to *Doom*, it's filled with lavish extras. And that's reflected in the performance. One of the downsides of *Blade of Agony* is its



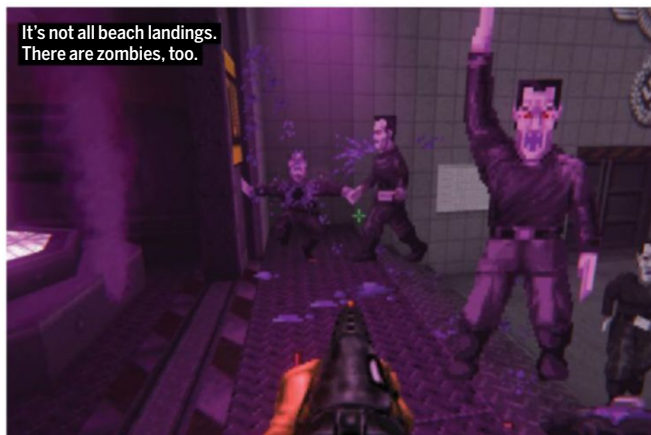
**IT BECOMES A FAST SHOOTER THAT REWARDS EXPLORATION AND THOROUGHNESS**

framerate dips, even on a powerful PC. I experienced more performance problems here than while playing id's most recent *Doom* game.

Missions are set across the breadth of World War II's many fronts. The first, Operation Speerspitze, takes place in Tunisia. It's a night infiltration mission, and feels reminiscent of the opening levels of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. There's a distinct difficulty curve to the opening mission, as Blazkowicz starts equipped with just a knife. Here's where *Blade of Agony* reveals another neat trick: Stealth. It's basic, but it's possible to kill enemies by creeping up to them unseen.



Before each mission, you can visit HQ for a briefing.



It's not all beach landings. There are zombies, too.



The facial expressions are on point.





Much of the first mission is spent managing ammo. It's fiendishly difficult, as marksmen hide on the rooftops, chipping at your health. But after this period of desperate scavenging, the pickups come thicker and faster, and the action transitions to something more familiar. As you collect weapons and ammo, *Blade of Agony's* pace evens out. It becomes a fast shooter that rewards exploration and thoroughness. At HQ, you can spend money on armor, health packs, and even a metal detector. You're encouraged to leave no room unturned, and no Nazi unkillable.

It also becomes increasingly *Wolfenstein*. The opening would suggest a serious, realistic story, but occult elements and weird science are slowly introduced. A recurring boss, Dr Josef Schabbs, is a giant in a lab coat, who throws handfuls of syringes in your direction. Before long, undead Nazis are thrown into the mix. It's a weird mix of styles, but, thanks to the presentation—the mix of 3D environments and 2D sprites, and the exaggerated *Doom*-style death expressions—it never feels so serious as to be jarring. And that's despite their being a mission set during Operation Overlord.

Yes, as a World War II game—even a silly one with supersoldiers—there is a Normandy mission, as Blazkowicz works to disable flak cannons with C4. One of my favorite things about *Blade of Agony* is the

distinct color palette of each location. Allied HQ is warm, almost sepia in tone. Tunisia is dark, with a blueish tint against beige and yellow brickwork. Normandy, of course, is so gray as to be almost monochrome. The amount of effort that's been poured into these maps is admirable, and I regularly found myself impressed by some small detail.

### SLICED UP

Much like those early id shooters, *Blade of Agony* is split into episodes. Two have been released so far—the second, *Shadows of the Reich*, having arrived in June. It shows definite ambition, opening with Blazkowicz stealthing through a Nazi prison—again subverting the later action with an unarmed section and a careful crawl towards your first pistol. Later, you fight alongside an AI companion and man the turret of a tank. Throughout, you're running and gunning, but there's enough variety to keep things from feeling stale.

*Blade of Agony* isn't the best example of combat in a *Doom* mod, nor is it filled with the purest, most intricate maps. But its scope is remarkable. It's an amazing showcase of the malleability of GZDoom, and a fascinating clash of shooter styles into an ambitious campaign that somehow still feels cohesive. It's not yet finished, but these first two episodes are a great start, and well worth your time. ■



## WAD YOU LIKE *Other great Doom total conversions*



### THE ADVENTURES OF SQUARE

Set in a colorful cartoon world, you, a square, straight up murder a whole bunch of circles. You monster.



### PIRATE DOOM

It's *Doom*, but with pirates. Full of neat touches, from the soundtrack, to the guns, to the Hell Knight barmen.



### BRUTAL DOOM 64

*Brutal Doom* arguably gets a little too much attention. This violent remake of *Doom 64* is neat nonetheless.



### TOTAL CHAOS

It's not out yet, but this open world survival horror looks amazing, and should be available some time this year.





“LucasArts was doing some really innovative stuff here”







# STAR WARS: DARK FORCES

Revisiting the classic LucasArts FPS. *By Andy Kelly*

**I**n *Rogue One* we're told the story of hero Jyn Erso, who infiltrates a heavily defended Imperial base and heroically steals the Death Star plans for the Rebel Alliance. But before Gareth Edwards' film, Star Wars fans knew a different story about another hero. In this version of events, the focus of the first mission in *Dark Forces*—now officially declared non-canon by Disney—it's mercenary Kyle Katarn who steals the plans from the planet Danuta. And he doesn't do it by ducking between AT-ATs and TIE Fighters on a lush tropical

world. He does it by walking down some corridors and blasting a few Stormtroopers. But *Dark Forces* is an FPS from 1995, and *Rogue One* is a \$265 million movie from 2016, so it's probably unfair to compare the two.

Production on *Dark Forces* began in 1993. Justin Chin, now an executive

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASED**  
February 1995

**DEVELOPER**  
LucasArts

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/swdarkforces](http://bit.ly/swdarkforces)

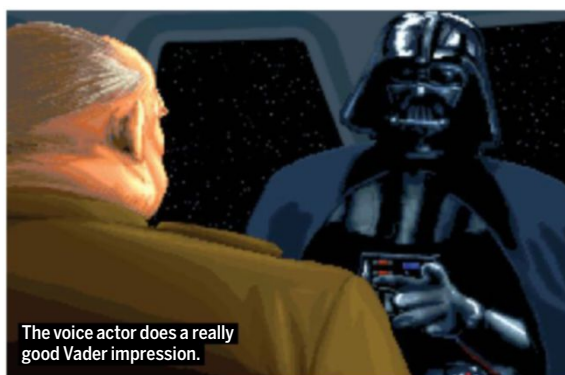
producer at Telltale Games, wrote the story and introduced Kyle Katarn and the Dark Troopers to the Star Wars extended universe, which would go on to feature in a number of other spinoffs. LucasArts had seen Star Wars-themed *Doom* mods, including one set on the Death Star, and this inspired it to make its own official FPS. And while *Doom* was economical with its story, *Dark Forces* would feature cinematic cutscenes with full voice acting and detailed mission briefings to give your actions greater context. Luke Skywalker was originally going to be the hero, but he was replaced by Katarn to avoid complicating things and conflicting with other stories.

It's hard not to think of *Dark Forces* as *Doom* with Stormtroopers, but that's slightly unfair. LucasArts' in-house Jedi engine could do a lot of tricks that id's game couldn't, including animated textures, 3D objects, and haze effects. This is most apparent at the beginning of a mission when you see Katarn's ship, the Moldy Crow, taking off and flying away. A rudimentary effect to modern eyes, but hugely impressive at the time. Lead designer Daron Stinnett, interviewed in *PC Gamer*

Shooting my way around Anteevy, an ice planet.



Aboard the Executor, Vader's personal Star Destroyer.



The voice actor does a really good Vader impression.

back in 1994, said this created an “active environment” where “ships come and go at flight decks and rivers sweep along”.

So while there are obvious similarities to *Doom*, from the colored keycards to the intricate, maze-like levels, *Dark Forces* uses a bespoke engine that was written completely from scratch, led by programmer Ray Gresko. You can

look up and down, which was still a rarity in first-person shooters in the mid-to-late '90s. And levels feature multiple floors, which was difficult to achieve at the time. *Dark Forces* isn't remembered for being a pioneering game in terms of its technology, but LucasArts was doing some really innovative stuff here. There's even some basic platforming, requiring you to leap between objects and sidle

along narrow platforms. I mean, it isn't much fun, but it's just another example of how *Dark Forces* took things beyond what id was capable of before it released *Quake*.

### LOOK SKYWALKER

“When *Doom* came out, we set our sights higher, and the Jedi engine has quite a bit more capability,” Stinnett told CD-ROM magazine in 1994. “But there's no rivalry. Both teams keep in touch via email, and the guys at id have played *Dark Forces*, and love it. The most obvious difference is that you can look up and down. To create the right perspective, the programmers employed a clever fish-eye effect, which makes buildings look like they're looming directly over you.”

A year after stealing the Death Star plans, ultimately leading to its destruction by Luke Skywalker, Katarn is hired to investigate reports of a new type of Stormtrooper. This leads to the reveal of the Dark Trooper project, led by Imperial general Rom Mohc. These intimidating mechanical exosuits were created specifically for *Dark Forces* by Chin. “Instead of just

## DARK FACES

*New characters introduced in Dark Forces*



### KYLE KATARN

A former Stormtrooper turned roguish mercenary, Kyle Katarn is hired by Mon Mothma to steal the Death Star plans for the Rebel Alliance. He's strong with the Force, and eventually becomes a Jedi in *Dark Forces II*.



### ROM MOHC

This Imperial general was a hero of the Clone Wars and the brains behind the Dark Trooper project. Obsessed with honor in combat, believing soldiers should always fight face to face on the battlefield, he found the Death Star distasteful.



### JAN ORS

A tough, resourceful intelligence operative for the Rebel Alliance. As well as convincing Kyle Katarn to join the Rebels, the pair also become romantically involved. Ors accompanies you on missions in *Dark Forces*.





This Imperial officer probably deserves to get lasered.

## THERE'S A PUNCHY WEIGHT TO THE COMBAT THAT I WASN'T EXPECTING

beefing up the Stormtroopers, I designed them to be more efficient," he told PC Gamer in 1994. "I wanted them to be more terrifying, more omnipotent." Three possible designs for the Dark Troopers were created, one of which was ultimately approved by Lucasfilm, and they later appeared in other games including *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *Star Wars: Empire at War*, and *Star Wars: Galactic Battlegrounds*.

The story takes Katarn to Jabba the Hutt's ship and Coruscant, as well as a few less familiar planets, and eventually aboard the Executor, Darth Vader's personal Super Star Destroyer. There's a good variety of environments, although everything has that blocky, box-like look typical of primitive 3D shooters from the era. Vader himself makes an appearance in some cutscenes, with Scott Lawrence standing in for James Earl Jones. Lawrence is a prolific Darth

Vader soundalike, playing the character in a variety of Star Wars games, including *Rogue Squadron*, *Force Commander*, *Battlefront II*, and, er, *Super Bombad Racing*.

What's most surprising about returning to *Dark Forces* is how much fun it is. The blasters feel fantastic, and the way enemies dramatically tumble backwards when you laser them is brilliantly reminiscent of the movies. There's a punchy weight to the combat that I wasn't expecting from such an early FPS, although you might find it frustratingly difficult by today's standards. I'm forever running out of ammo, leaving me with no choice but to wade into the fray, fists swinging, and hoping that I manage to take a Stormtrooper out and grab his ammo before I die.

### MOD RACING

The Steam version runs perfectly on modern PCs. It uses a preconfigured DOSBox, so most people should be able to launch it without having to mess with CPU speed settings. It even has cloud save support, which is more than can be said for a lot of modern games. But the mouse

controls do feel a little clumsy, which is to be expected from a 22-year-old game. It's amazing it that even runs at all. And if you can't stomach the old-school visuals, you could always download a mod, such as *DarkXL*, which adds real-time lighting, higher-resolution textures and visual tweaks to make it more appealing.

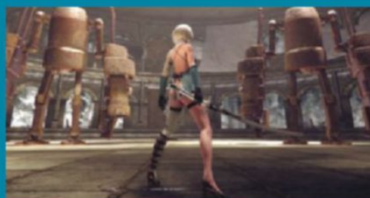
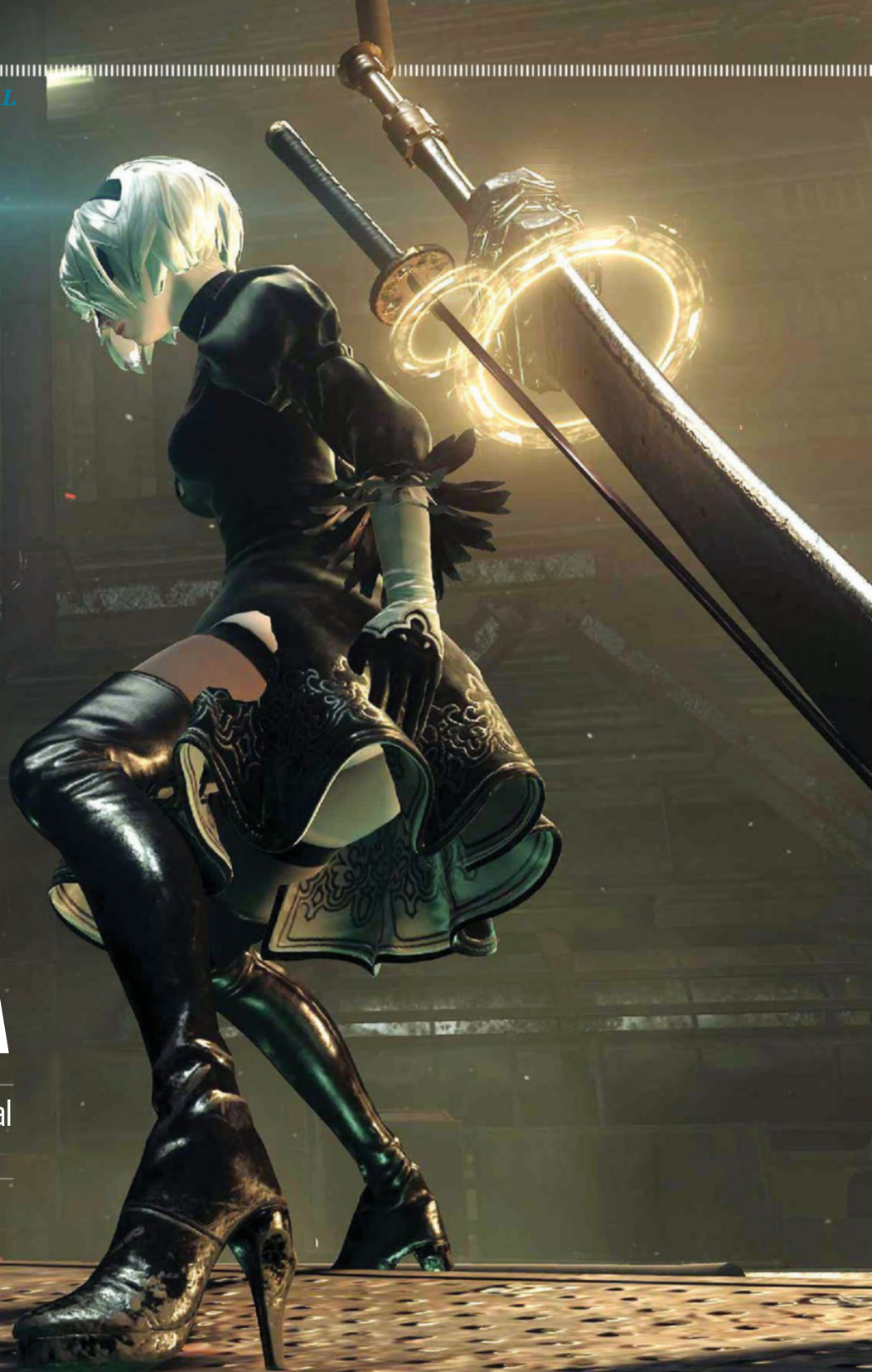
*Dark Forces* was a hit, selling 300,000 copies at launch. It also made an impact on the lucrative Star Wars merchandising empire, with Hasbro releasing action figures of Kyle Katarn and the Dark Troopers. The game's success led to a sequel in 1997, *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*, which saw Katarn embracing his Force sensitivity and becoming a Jedi. The lightsaber combat and multiplayer arguably make the *Jedi Knight* series more fondly remembered than *Dark Forces*, but the original is still worth revisiting as a surprisingly playable piece of Star Wars history. Of course, it's all non-canon now, along with the rest of the extended universe, but don't let that put you off. For some diehard fans it'll always be Kyle Katarn who bravely stole those Death Star plans, not Jyn Erso. ■





# FASHION IN NIER: AUTOMATA

From haute couture to industrial  
fetish wear. *By Kimberley Ballard*



**RIGHT:** 2B's pal 9S also gets some stylish threads, in Moschino-esque leather accessories that cling teasingly to his skin.





**I**f you were to list three ideal qualities that futuristic androids should possess as standard, they would be intelligence, resourcefulness and, above all, beauty.

In the world of *Nier: Automata*, beauty is key. Set in the aftermath of an alien invasion on Earth, humans have retreated to the Moon, and created androids called YoRHa to fight back. They're not just perfectly made subservient killing machines, but delectably dressed, in black lace, leather, and gossamer.

Instead of utilitarian uniforms you may expect from an army deployed for destruction, YoRHa look like ghosts from Gothic romance crossed with children's toys. At times this feels far-fetched, especially when watching a woman fight machines in a gown and stiletto heels, but it's also a celebration of contemporary fashion from Los Angeles to Milan.

When we meet *Nier*'s protagonist 2B, she is a draped and ruffled china doll. She pirouettes across the screen in a billowing velvet dress adorned with a high collar and a delicate cut-out at the back, and is accessorised with thigh-high leather boots and black stockings. With her traditionally feminine, hyperwaisted silhouette, 2B's uniform is not about practicality, but desire. She is the femme fatale of this planetary ruin. 2B's style may have been inspired by Gothic Lolita, a Japanese fashion subculture. Like an elaborate play on Victorian fashion, young women don their dresses like tiered cakes, their bouffant skirts layered in ribbons and pleats. While the silhouette is similar, 2B's costume is more adult, swapping

## LOOKBOOK *Four more fashion-forward heroes who bring style to your PC*



### DEDESEC WATCH DOGS 2

It may be full of tech experts, but DedSec is so hip it stings, with studded jackets, skull-print socks and graphic tees.



### EMILY KALDWIN DISHONORED 2

Emily brings Victorian fashion to Karnaca, with a high-necked navy trench coat and riding boots in soft leather. Swoon.



### BAYONETTA BAYONETTA

She's a gun-wielding sorceress and part of her charm is to look fierce, thus the beehive hairdo and skin-tight catsuit.



### LIGHTNING FINAL FANTASY XIII

With her bubblegum-pink hair and love of leather accessories, no wonder Lightning is an inspiration for fashion designers.

a parasol for a svelte sword, and Mary Jane shoes for killer heels.

Instead, 2B's look emulates several haute couture collections. In David Koma's 2017 Spring ready-to-wear line, for instance, the Georgian designer was inspired by the opulence of Russian 20th century court dress across a monochrome palette. Similarly, in its 2017 fall ready-to-wear collection, French fashion house Saint Laurent featured a line of dresses with ruffled shoulders, draped leather and belts cinched sharply around the waist. This brute-femme aesthetic is also a favorite of sister designers Rodarte, whose 2009 spring/summer line was a sewing box of romantic, wispy garments that juxtaposed tough leather with lace.

## DRESSED TO KILL

We meet other impeccably dressed women, such as A2 and Kainé. Although Kainé's costume lacks the grandeur of 2B's perfectly stitched gown, her babydoll dress still looks like high-end lingerie, its color and cut like a Betsey Johnson garment. An American designer whose clothes evoke summer days and slumber parties of adolescence, Johnson is known for tiny dresses and skirts in sugary colors. A2's look is even more revealing, jumping across the screen in stockings and a halter top.



Even *Nier*'s villains have a runway of their own. One particular boss looks like a model from an Alexander McQueen collection: Skeletal, grotesque, but beautiful. In McQueen's fall 2009 ready-to-wear collection, models were transformed into phantasmagoria, their faces chalked out and mouths blotted until their beauty was twisted into unnatural shapes. McQueen littered the runway with glass and pieces of broken machinery, highlighting the idea of women as broken dolls.

The idea of androids as playthings is heightened by echoes of fetish wear. In its prevalence of blindfolds, collars, and black materials, *Nier* recalls Zana Bayne, a New York fashion house described as a post-fetish leather brand. Unlike typical bondage wear, Bayne makes luxury items in buttery black leather, such as harnesses, chokers, and garters. 2B could easily be a model from a Bayne runway show, in boots that look like liquid latex and elbow-length gloves.

While the costume design in *Nier* has divided players, with some criticising its practicality, and others the way it sexualises women, there's no denying that its conceptual, cerebral fashion elevates the game. Fashion and videogames may be two starkly different disciplines, but *Nier* exists in its tantalising intersection. ■

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED  
March 2017

EXPECT TO PAY  
\$60

OUR REVIEW  
79%

LINK  
[www.nier-automata.com](http://www.nier-automata.com)



**LEFT:** YoRHa androids are created to fight, but the sharp line that dissects 2B's skirt also turns her into an object of desire.



TOM  
SENIOR

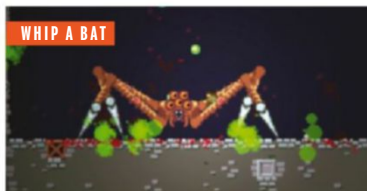
A wise old man once told me, 'Get busy leveling or get busy dying.' I live by those words today, Deckard Cain.



## TEKKEN 7

[tk7.tekken.com](http://tk7.tekken.com)

➔ The story mode is absolute drivel, but if you're prepared to go online *Tekken 7* is a surprisingly accessible beat-'em-up with some really fun characters. Play as a panda (who fights with a style called Kuma Shinken, by the way), and maul an irritating British boxer called Steve to unconsciousness, it's good times.



## CAVEBLAZERS

[www.rupeck.com/caveblazers](http://www.rupeck.com/caveblazers)

➔ *Caveblazers* may look a lot like *Spelunky*, but it comes with loads of crazy loot and awesome boss monsters. As you fight your way through the procedurally generated dungeon, every bat whipped and chest opened has a chance to spawn a potion, or a new magic bow, or a machine gun.



## DIABLO III

[us.battle.net/d3](http://us.battle.net/d3)

➔ To celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Diablo*, the Necromancer class is being resurrected for *Diablo III*. Throw some bone spears at beastmen, and blow up their corpses for treasure and experience in time-honored fashion. And don't forget to summon your own personal army of skellies.



## DISHONORED 2

[dishonored.bethesda.net/en](http://dishonored.bethesda.net/en)

➔ *The Death of the Outsider* standalone expansion was announced at E3, so this is a good time to get reacquainted with the Outsider's smug, stupid face before you put an end to him forever. Play as Corvo if you played as Emily the first time, or vice versa, it's a very different game.



## DAWN OF WAR III

[www.dawnofwar.com](http://www.dawnofwar.com)

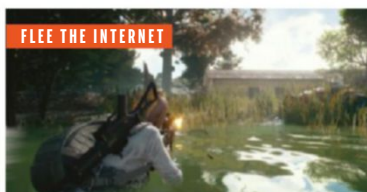
➔ This is a tough strategy game if you take it online, but the CPU skirmish is entertaining if you experiment with some unusual builds. Pick your favorite faction, pick your favorite unit, make as many as you can and enjoy the lasers. I recommend lots of dreadnoughts.



## BAYONETTA

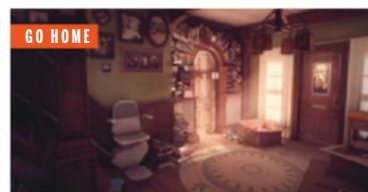
[www.platinumgames.com/games/bayonetta](http://www.platinumgames.com/games/bayonetta)

➔ Platinum's supreme third-person brawler has been on PC for a few months now, and we should probably put it in Must Play forever. The combat system is sharp and beautiful, but it's the presentation that sticks in my mind. You start fighting on an exploding clocktower and it accelerates from there.

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S  
BATTLEGROUNDS

[www.playbattlegrounds.com](http://www.playbattlegrounds.com)

➔ This is a tense, tense online Battle Royale scenario that tests your hiding skills, as well as your nerves. You can raid houses and find a nice gun if you want, but I recommend waiting out the carnage by lying very still in a bush. It is more fun than I have made it sound.



## WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

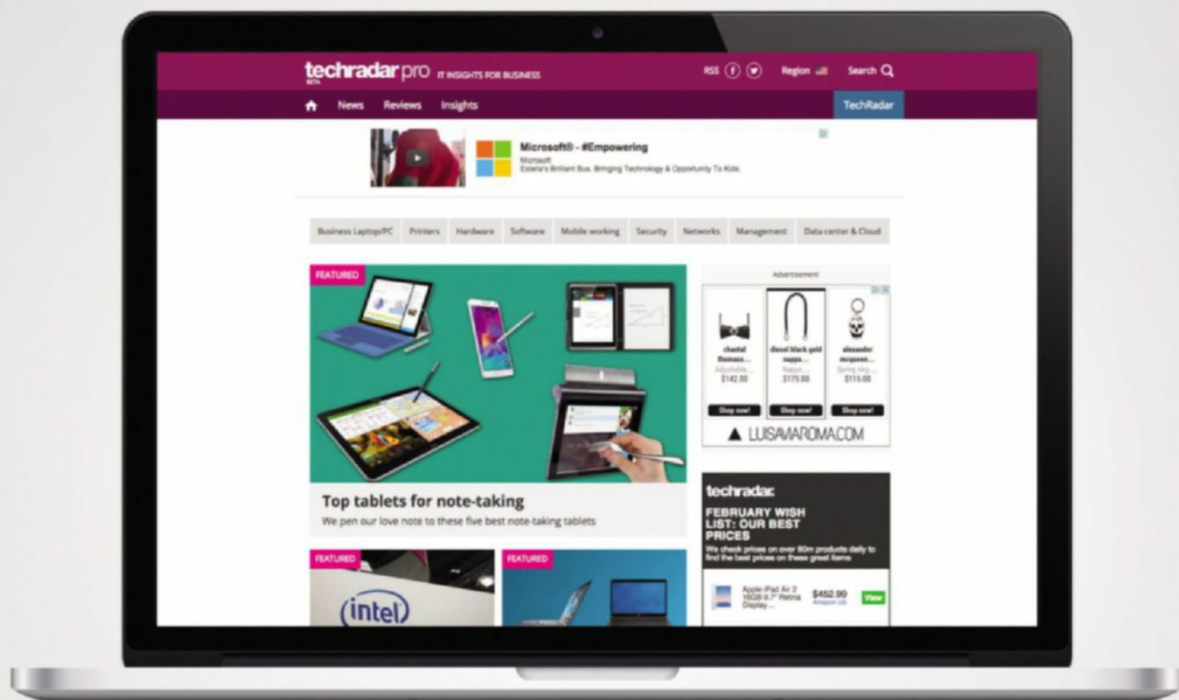
[www.giantsparrow.com/games/finch](http://www.giantsparrow.com/games/finch)

➔ The most accomplished story game that I've played for years. This tale of a woman returning to her fantastical family home is lavishly presented, and crams more surprises into four hours than most games manage in 20. We reviewed it back in issue 306, and awarded it a prestigious 91.



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[ UPGRADE ]

# GROUP TEST

*By Ed Chester*





## Q&A

### Why mechanical keyswitches?

Some users still aren't convinced by mechanical keyswitches, however the benefits are clear. They last longer than membrane-type keys, and they feel responsive throughout their life. They also have a far more consistent resistance, making for a more even-feeling typing experience.

### Blue/Brown/Red?

The leading mechanical keyswitch brand, Cherry MX, has three main keyswitch types. Tactile (Blue and Brown) have a slight bump as you press the key, giving you physical feedback when the button has been pressed—Blue adds an audible click to this. Meanwhile, Red provides a linear motion with no physical feedback of when the switch has been activated—you just see the results on your screen.

### Which switch is best for playing games?

Blue and Brown switches are preferred by typists due to the feedback they provide, making it easier to touch type. However, for gaming, many prefer the linear type switches as they allow for rapid key presses.

## Dictionary

### Mechanical keyswitch -

This is any form of properly engineered individual switch used to register a keypress. Older incarnations include the buckling spring switch of old IBM keyboards, while the modern explosion of mechanical keyboards has been driven by the switches made by Cherry MX.

**Keycap** - The thing you actually press. You can easily replace the keycaps—there are hundreds of colors and fonts you can use, making it possible to customize your keyboard.

# KEYBOARDS

The best mechanical setups out there

If the reports are to be believed, there has been something of a downturn in the mechanical keyboard market. With every man and his dog having already bought into the revolution, it seems that the scene has already reached its saturation point.

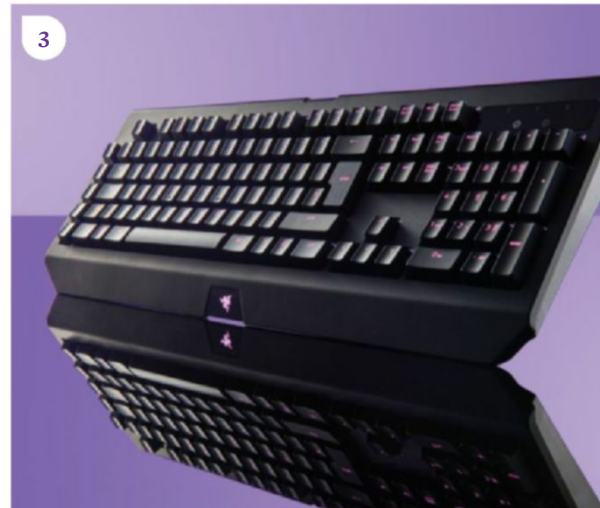
However, that doesn't mean there isn't still plenty of choice out there if you want to upgrade or join in fashionably late. So, we've grabbed seven of the top keyboards you can currently buy, all of which feature mechanical keyswitches and RGB backlighting, and, in some cases, several more features, too.



1



2



3

## ASUS ROG CLAYMORE

www.asus.com **\$300**

→ The ROG Claymore from Asus is the most expensive keyboard that's featured in this group test, and just about the most expensive keyboard you can actually go out and buy, full stop.

1

There's good reason for this: You get the mechanical switches and RGB lighting, a hefty metal build and its signature feature—a detachable numpad that can be affixed to either side of the device.

It makes it more appealing to leftys and, for right-handed users, it can also be used for macro keys or simply to allow for more mouse room.

The latter is welcome as it means your arms end up at a more natural angle when using the classic WASD-and-mouse gaming combo. You can also just buy the keyboard without the numpad.

This is also a great-looking piece of kit. The 'Mayan' pattern on the top plate and the backlit ROG logo add just the right amount of flair.

Performance is also excellent. It's available with a range of Cherry MX switches, with us testing the Cherry MX Red version, and they're as good as ever. We also like that you can remove the Micro USB cable, though we're less keen on there being no USB hub and no extra gaming keys. All told, though, this is fantastic.

85%

## COOLER MASTER MASTERKEYS PRO L RGB

www.coolermaster.com **\$140**

→ Cooler Master describes the MasterKeys Pro L as “no gimmicks, just quality”, and despite it being the second cheapest keyboard on our test, this is a tagline it well and truly lives up to.

2

What Cooler Master has got right here is the simple design. The base and keys are unadorned with logos, light-up sections, or anything extraneous.

What's more, there are some nice practical touches here, too. The base rises slightly above the sides of the keys, providing them with some protection from getting snagged and broken—a common problem with open designs.

The Micro USB cable for this keyboard is also removable, making it easy to replace if it gets damaged. All this and you get proper Cherry MX keyswitches, with all three types available.

The lighting is fully programmable via Cooler Master's software, with downloadable layouts also available, and there are four extra profile-switching buttons above the numpad. On-the-fly macro recording is also offered, however the software has no macro editing function. It's on-the-fly or nothing.

Nonetheless, the price, great design, and combination of features make this keyboard a real winner.

90%





4

## RAZER BLACKWIDOW CHROMA V2 [www.razer.com](http://www.razer.com) \$170

→ Razer can sometimes be accused of manufacturing products that are a little style over substance, but with the Blackwidow Chroma V2, it has proved that statement is far from the truth.

3

Not that it isn't stylish. It's minimalistic with nothing more than a backlit logo adorning the matte-black plastic body. The only thing letting it down is a cheap-looking glossy plastic section in the top-right.

We also like that Razer provides a sample key that's accessible from outside the box so you can try out which switch you prefer before you buy.

Also included is a proper cushioned wrist rest that magnetically attaches to the front of the keyboard. This provides the proper comfort and support required of a wrist rest, unlike the token hard plastic efforts you get on most keyboards.

You also get a USB pass-through. It's only USB 2.0, and it's on the side, but it's still nice to have. There's a headphone pass-through there, too.

As for Razer's keyswitches the Yellow ones work well and are rated to last ages. What's more, they are compatible with Cherry MX keycaps so you can customize them to your heart's content.

The Blackwidow Chroma V2 is pricey, but it largely delivers the goods.

85%

## CORSAIR K95 PLATINUM

[www.corsair.com](http://www.corsair.com) \$199

→ The Corsair K95 Platinum is the second most expensive keyboard on this test, but it certainly has all the bells and whistles to show for it, especially when it comes extra functions and key customization.

4

You get six extra programmable keys on the left side, multimedia buttons and a volume wheel on the top-right, and the top-left houses buttons for switching profiles, adjusting backlight brightness, and locking the Windows keys.

There's more, too. A detachable wrist rest is included and there's a USB pass-through on the back as well. The wrist rest also offers a rubber top that's bumpy on one side and dimpled on the other.

Also present is Corsair's signature brushed aluminium top section. This is joined by an RGB strip that runs along the back edge, as well as a full complement of RGB keys.

The design looks busy, but it still feels nice. Otherwise, this keyboard delivers on all fronts. The Cherry MX Brown switches are fantastic, and Corsair's software makes programming the lighting and key functions easy. Super-fast Cherry MX Speed switches are also available.

This keyboard is mighty expensive, but has the functionality to justify that.

85%



## LOGITECH ORION SPARK G910

[www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) **\$125**

→ The G910 doesn't make the best first impression, thanks to a design that's a bit 'plastic fantastic'. While several of the other keyboards on our test are externally all plastic, with this you can really feel it.

5

The addition of strange 3D-looking symbols on the gaming keys and the lit-up G logo in the top-left and G910 logo on the wrist rest don't help matters.

Then there's the ARX dock. This wobbly piece of blue plastic slides out the back to provide a place to rest your phone, which you can link up to the keyboard via an app. This lets you control aspects of your PC and keyboard from your phone—like lighting, music, and seeing PC temperatures and other stats. It's nice, but the appeal is pretty niche.

You get plenty of extra keys, though. You've got four gaming keys above the F1-F4 keys and five more on the left. There are also buttons for profiles, a host of media keys and a volume wheel.

As for performance, it holds up well. Logitech's Romer-G keyswitches feel great and they're rated to last for ages. However, you can't replace the keycaps with third-party ones, which is a shame.

Add in the non-removable wrist rest and lack of a USB hub and you have a keyboard that doesn't wholly convince.

**75%**

## ROCCAT SUORA FX

[www.roccat.org](http://www.roccat.org) **\$140**

→ The Roccat Suora FX is as straightforward as a mechanical gaming keyboard can get, and therein lies its appeal. Its barebones design is completely devoid of any unnecessary additions.

6

This not only results in a keyboard that looks appealingly simple, but also means that you have more space to move your mouse around.

The downside is that you miss out on a few of the niceties of other keyboards. There's no volume wheel, no USB pass-through, and no gaming keys. You just get four extra keys above the numpad for mute, volume down, volume up and 'Game Mode', which disables the Windows key.

Otherwise, you get programmable RGB backlighting and plenty of default secondary functions that can be activated by hitting the Fn key.

You don't, however, get Cherry MX keyswitches, but rather ones made by TTC. They still offer good performance and withstand 50 million keystrokes, plus Cherry MX keycaps fit on them. Only the Brown TTC switches are available, though, which have the same action as Cherry MX Red switches.

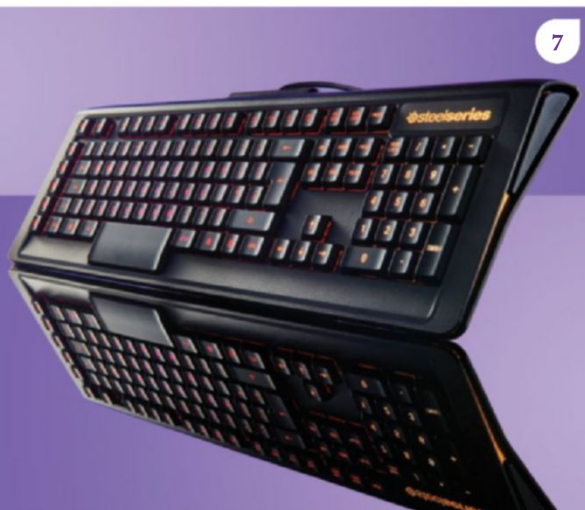
This is a great, simple keyboard. It's just that the Cooler Master MasterKeys Pro L does the same for less.

**70%**





6



7

## STEELSERIES APEX M800

www.steelseries.com **\$200**

→ The SteelSeries Apex M800 is very reasonably priced. Available for just \$200, it's incredibly cheap for a fully programmable RGB keyboard. However, that doesn't mean it's an instant bargain.

7

Things get off to a good start. Although all-plastic, there's a simplicity to the design of this keyboard, with the illuminated sides being a nice little flourish. You also get five extra keys down the left side, there's a two-port USB hub on the back, and the massive spacebar is surprisingly useful.

Unfortunately, this keyboard has a couple of issues. The first is forgivable given the low price, which is that the keyswitches are SteelSeries' own QS1. Like the Logitech, they're incompatible with replacements, though you do get replacement keys for the Alt and SteelSeries keys in the box. The switches otherwise feel nice, and are rated for 60 million keystrokes. They have a linear action, like Cherry MX Red, but with a short throw of just 3mm.

The other problem, though, is that the backlighting on the keys flickers. This is an issue I've encountered before, and I find it troublesome. It's distracting, and can make it difficult to focus on the keys when looking directly at the keyboard.

70%

## STACKED UP



## ESSENTIALS

	Keyswitches	Volume wheel	USB pass-through	Programmable macros
1	Cherry MX	Yes	No	Yes
2	Cherry MX	No	No	No
3	Razer	No	Yes	Yes
4	Cherry MX	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Logitech Romer-G	No	No	Yes
6	TTC	No	No	Yes
7	SteelSeries QS1	Yes	Yes	Yes

YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *Budget build*

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

### *Mid-range build*

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

### *Advanced build*

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.





# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

**TOTAL**  
**\$845**

MOTHERBOARD



## H270M Bazooka

MSI **\$84**

Kaby Lake has landed and the 270 series chipsets with it. MSI's Bazooka H270M is a perfect fit for our new CPU.

PROCESSOR

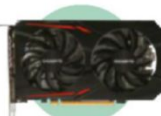


## Pentium G4560

Intel **\$60**

We saw zero framerate difference between this four-threaded Pentium and a core i7-7700K across multiple titles.

GRAPHICS CARD



## GTX 1050 Ti 4GB

Gigabyte **\$139**

We gave the 1050 Ti another shot, and when buying a fresh system, it's more than capable of driving most games at 1080p.

MEMORY



## Fury Black 8GB @2400

HyperX **\$68**

DDR4 packs higher speeds, better energy efficiency, and larger capacities. 8GB is still perfect for most games, too.

POWER SUPPLY



## 600BQ G4560

EVGA **\$40**

This system should only draw 225W from the wall. However, if you're looking to upgrade, this PSU gives you plenty of headroom.

SSD



## CS1311 120GB SSD

PNY **\$53**

It's a budget offering, but for \$53 and with sequential reads, and writes of 550 and 520MB/s, it's hard to argue with.

HDD



## Caviar Blue 1TB 7200rpm

Western Digital **\$49**

One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups, and AAA titles.

CASE



## Neos

Bitfenix **\$55**

The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.

DISPLAY



## VS247HR 60Hz 1080p

Asus **\$131**

1080p resolution, 60fps—it's a monitor made for PC gamers. Coupled with the RX 480, playing on this will be silky smooth.

KEYBOARD



## K30

Corsair **\$60**

It may not be mechanical, but it's still a classy act for any would be gamer looking to build themselves a sweet entry later.

MOUSE



## Rival 100

SteelSeries **\$30**

SteelSeries' Rival lineup is ideal for those looking to get a quality gaming mouse at a respectable price.

HEADSET



## HyperX Cloud

Kingston **\$76**

Our favorite gaming headset, and it happens to be as cheap as plenty of inferior cans. A good buy for any gaming rig.



# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

**TOTAL**  
**\$1,698**

MOTHERBOARD



## X370 SLI Plus

MSI **\$136**

MSI's X370 SLI Plus is identical to the gaming series motherboard that costs not a lot more, so why waste money?

PROCESSOR



## Ryzen 5 1400

AMD **\$166**

Four cores, eight threads, and half the price of the Intel equivalent. Gaming performance is solid, and streaming capability is robust.

GRAPHICS CARD



## Windforce GTX 1070 8GB

Gigabyte **\$380**

The 1440p killer, Gigabyte's GeForce GTX 1070 will run quiet, cool and absolutely keep you at 60fps, even at WQHD.

COOLER



## Kraken X31

NZXT **\$80**

To get the most out of a good CPU you need a cooler to match. The Kraken X31 is powerful, quiet, and great for overlocks.

MEMORY



## Fury 16GB (2x8GB) DDR4 - 2666

HyperX **\$136**

Ryzen demands high-spec memory, and you can't get better than adding a dash of HyperX to your build.

POWER SUPPLY



## RMx 650W

Corsair **\$114**

Nothing like having a quality power supply. Get a decent cable kit for this one, and you can easily spice up your rig.

SSD



## 850 EVO 250GB

Samsung **\$108**

Samsung retains its top spot on the SSD pile with the fantastically priced, very speedy 850 EVO. Still the best price/performance.

HDD



## Caviar Blue 1TB 7200RPM

Western Digital **\$49**

SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you can handle.

CASE



## Eclipse P400S TG

Phanteks **\$90**

The clean lines, intuitive build features, and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our midrange case of choice.

DISPLAY



## Q2778VQE

AOC **\$250**

This entry-level 1440p monitor is perfect for those looking to upgrade from 1080p. It's cheap and still looks sleek.

KEYBOARD



## K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **\$130**

Available in red, brown, or blue switches, with a USB passthrough and all the features we loved the original K70 for. Almost perfect.

MOUSE



## Castor

Mionix **\$59**

Mionix's Castor is a dream to use, supportive like a glove. With clutter-free software and an optical sensor, it's hard to go wrong.





# ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

**TOTAL**  
**\$3,178**

MOTHERBOARD



## Crosshair VI Hero

Asus **\$240**

Asus's Crosshair VI Hero provides a stable backbone for any would be early adopter looking to join the red core revolution.

PROCESSOR



## Ryzen 7 1700

AMD **\$305**

This is for the Twitch streamers, the pro gamers, and the video creators. Eight cores, 16 threads, stunning value.

GRAPHICS CARD



## GTX 1080 Ti Founder's Edition

MSI **\$673**

The king of high end performance right now. Don't be fooled by its 11GB of VRAM, this will crush games at all resolutions.

COOLER

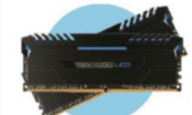


## Kraken X62

NZXT **\$159**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favorite things: An infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator, and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



## Vengeance LED 32GB - 2666

Corsair **\$255**

32GB of RAM is excessive for anyone gaming today. Use the excess either as a RAM cache, or for video editing in After Effects.

POWER SUPPLY



## HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **\$150**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



## 960 Evo 250GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **\$128**

A cost-effective OS drive delivering sequential read and write speeds of 3200MB/s and 1500MB/s respectively.

SSD 2



## MX300 1.1TB SSD

Crucial **\$276**

At 1TB, this SSD from Crucial is fantastic value, and more than big enough for all of your AAA gaming titles.

CASE



## Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **\$175**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



## AGON AG271QG

AOC **\$615**

It's a lot cheaper than Asus's PG279QG, and we can't tell why. 165Hz, IPS, G-Sync, 4ms response... this is the perfect screen.

KEYBOARD



## K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **\$130**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



## Rival 700

SteelSeries **\$72**

Swappable sensors, back plates, 3D printed rear guards, and an OLED display. The most comfortable, adaptive mouse we've used.

# We're sorry

Did we miss your favorite game from the Top 100? Don't worry, here are some alternate choices for you to glue into the list.

## EVERY '80S RPG

RELEASED 1989 LAST POSITION A forum thread

**Phil:** Sure, the interface is unwieldy and confusing, and you have to squint to make out the sprites amid the muddy environments, but this is still miles ahead of all the streamlined *console* abominations that *idiots* today have the temerity to call an RPG. What's the point of a levelling system if you can't ruin your playthrough by putting all of your skill points into cross-stitching?

## ANY HERO SHOOTER THAT ISN'T OVERWATCH

RELEASED 2017 LAST POSITION DeviantArt

**Phil:** Blizzard gets all the attention, but *Overwatch* doesn't have characters as iconic as the worryingly sexy fox, or the guy who's literally just a tree, does it?

## SEQUEL YOU IRONICALLY THINK IS BETTER

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION The bargain bin

**Andy:** Everyone loves the original, and the second game only improved on it. But no, it's the low-selling third game that's actually the best. Badly designed and inferior to its predecessors, but there's just something about it.

**Phil:** Why do people keep saying the additional features make it unwieldy? You don't have to play the tower defence minigame if you don't want to.

## THAT MMO YOU AND THREE OTHER PEOPLE STILL PLAY

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION Your Discord

**Samuel:** The character designs were lambasted at launch (is that a grizzly bear in a chain mail bikini?), but the crafting is bloody fantastic.

## HARDCORE STRATEGY YOU PRETEND TO ENJOY

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION GameFAQs

**Phil:** The people on the subreddit you visit claim you're not a real PC gamer unless you like this, and now that you've played it... you agree? I mean, yeah, your campaign isn't going very well, and the tutorial you didn't understand missed out some important systems, but if you didn't love it, you wouldn't have sunk all of... oh, three hours into it. (Huh, really? It felt longer.)

## AVERAGE FLIGHT SIM YOU BOUGHT A HOTAS FOR

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION The charity shop

**Samuel:** You spent a lot of money on a Pro Flight X56 Rhino to play this bad boy. Let's fly to Paris! Oh, the Eiffel Tower is seven polygons.

## CULT CLASSIC THAT NEEDS 14 MODS JUST SO IT DOESN'T CRASH

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION A Twitter thread

**Samuel:** Bad voice acting, terrible shooting, and zero resolution options. This only ended up on Steam because the developer fell on his keyboard. But what charm! Can you believe the protagonist spent an entire ten-minute cutscene discussing spaghetti?

**Phil:** Sure, the widescreen hack is only available from a shady filesharing site, but it's worth it so you can look interesting.

## WEIRD GAME ONLY WEIRDOS LIKE

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION A Wordpress blog post

**Andy:** So many haven't played or even heard of this weird game I love. That's what makes it special in my eyes. To me, a weirdo, this weird game is the epitome of PC gaming.

**Phil:** This one hits a bit too close to home, given our actual list.

...UNTIL  
**SEPTEMBER  
12**

## THE SEXY '90S POINT-AND-CLICK GAME YOUR DAD HID IN THE LOFT

RELEASED 1994 LAST POSITION A garage sale

**Samuel:** Banned in 20 countries, but it holds up for one reason: click the hero and his pants fall down. A classic.

## DRAGON AGE II

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION 94

**Samuel:** Great RPG or *greatest* RPG?

**Phil:** Who needs tactical combat or varied environments when you get to hang with Varric in The Hanged Man?





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